Imago

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Imago

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Summary

Last major story in the AU where Hannibal is a troubled FBI profiler and Will is a psychiatrist and serial killer.

Chapter 1

Hannibal helps Will to lower himself into the bath. His bandaged hands dangling over the edges of the tub to keep them dry, Will sighs and sinks back into the hot water, his eyes closed.

Perched on the edge of the bathtub, Hannibal takes in the sight. Melting into relaxation, Will's face is slack and peaceful, the lines etched there by strain and endlessly cycling emotion faded. He looks so much more vulnerable with his eyes closed; Absent the cutting warmth of those changeable eyes looking back at him - seeing through him, always, whether Hannibal wants it or not - Hannibal sees the softness of his eyelids, the fine blue veins visible beneath the paleness of his skin, and the curl of thick, dark eyelashes.

Will's long neck curves forward as he lets the back of his head rest against the edge of the tub, the bulge of his adam's apple prominent. The scar just below his collarbone, where the judge tried to stab him in the throat but missed, is bright pink in the revealing light of the bathroom, and Hannibal knows that if Will turned over he would see the the other jagged scars that run down his back.

Will's body is not as strong as it had been before he became ill. Much of the tight, efficient muscle that corded his limbs is gone, and his chest has become thin. Between his narrow legs Will's cock, as soft and restful as the rest of him, bobs in the faint rippling of the water.

He looks, Hannibal thinks ruefully, closer to what one might expect a psychiatrist to look like absent his clothing.

It is not a wasted look, nor is he marked in any obvious way by illness, though Will remains extremely pallid. He is not, Hannibal believes, ugly in the way he felt himself to be ugly after the escape, but there is a difference to Will, the fragility that is still lingering inside himself more apparent on his body.

If anything, Hannibal finds Will to be more beautiful than he has ever been.

The neurological side-effects of the encephalitis have lingered - longer, Will has told him, with anxious frustration, than they did last time. He's often dizzy, and he has prolonged bouts of extreme weakness in his limbs. Sometimes Will still sleeps through eighteen of every twenty-four hours.

He is like a kitten, sharp of tooth but fragile and drowsy, and like a kitten he demands attention and affection almost constantly. Hannibal feels like a patient gardener, finally enjoying the bounty of all his long labor.

Will opens his eyes and looks up at Hannibal, and though his smile is fond Hannibal can see Will parsing out everything he sees reflected in Hannibal's eyes, weighing it cautiously.

When Will speaks, it is to say, "I'm not going to stop, you know. It's not going to be, 'let's take out this last old Nazi and then I'm done."

“I know,” Hannibal tells Will calmly.

“Stopping isn’t on the table. Not ever.”

“I don’t want for you to stop.”

Will sinks a little lower into the water, as though to conceal himself. But he answers, “I know. You like it.”

Hannibal hums agreeably. He reaches for the shampoo.

“I need to slow down from what I’ve been doing these last two years, though,” Will continues.

“You do,” Hannibal agrees. “Each one is a new risk.

“And there’s something else; you won’t ever again do it without me.”

“Is that so? And what if I want my privacy?”

“You don’t. You want to watch me work - and you want a chance to show off yourself.”

Will’s eyes flicker away from Hannibal’s anxiously, but then he makes himself meet Hannibal’s gaze again. “You haven’t seen me… really working someone over yet, have you?”

Mason had been all of Hannibal's doing, and the trucker and Matthew had both been put down quickly.

“I’m looking forward to it,” Hannibal says, almost casually. He pours some of the shampoo into his palm and adds, “Bow your head.”

Will sighs contentedly as Hannibal massages his scalp, some of his unease with the conversation bleeding out from him under Hannibal’s touch. This is how things have been, under Hannibal’s care. Will’s hands are healing, and he can do more things for himself now than he could a couple of weeks ago, but this type of work would still be awkward and leave his hands in agony.

And he has found, too, that he enjoys being taken care of. He tilts his head back and close his eyes, and feels the warm water against his scalp as Hannibal uses the shower wand to rinse the suds from his hair. A minute later, and Hannibal is leaned over him again, scrubing his back with a washcloth.

Mouser slips under the space under the bathroom door to investigate what is going on, her front paws sliding on the tile as she pulls her hips through the gap.

“How the hell does she still do that?” Will says with wonderment, because the space seems much to slim to fit even her diminutive body.

Neither of them know much about cats, but when Hannibal found her he had assumed by size alone that she was a very young kitten, but the vet informed him that she was in fact at least

five months old, with all her adult teeth in place. She is a runt of a thing, though well proportioned, and Hannibal wonders if she will ever break five pounds.

Mouser jumps onto the back of the toilet tank and then the edge of the tub. Will watches her uneasily. “If she falls in, you’re going to have to get Cordell out here to stitch me up all over again,” he says.

Winston whines on the other side of the door, abandoned by all, and seeing the quick look Will casts toward the door, Hannibal rises and goes to let the puppy in as well.

Hannibal takes up the washcloth and goes back to work. After a minute or two he says, “Something is troubling me,” and feels Will tense up beneath him, fearful still that Hannibal is about to reveal some lingering distaste for Will and his predilections.

“Why do you kill?” he asks Will.

Will twists his neck to look up at Hannibal, then lower his eyes to stare into the soapy water. “I -” Will says. “You know, Hannibal. I don’t have to explain that to you. You know.”

“I think that I understand it,” Hannibal allows. “You kill most often to right what you perceive as wrongs, and that isn't a pretext - or, it isn’t only a pretext. You are sincerely moved to violence and outrage by rape and racism and the abuse of children.”

There is a minute nod of Will’s head, so Hannibal goes on. “And then sometimes you kill exclusively as a cure, because it stabilizes you and helps you to control your own fear, and in those cases you are often apt to pick… shall we we say, ‘undeserving’ victims?”

“I want to get out of the water,” Will says.

Hannibal helps him stand and step out of the bathtub.

Will lets Hannibal towel him off, but only briefly. He is twitchy and anxious, too exposed in front of the bathroom mirrors and under Hannibal’s gaze.

He sits down on the bed, and Hannibal bundles the blankets over his shoulders without being asked.

They are still in Belarus, though this is a new house in a new town, far away from Minsk and from the site of Grutas’ murder, and Will is constantly cold.

“I had a thing happen once,” Will says. “I brought a woman down into the basement and she, you know, woke up on the table, you know? And I’d been waiting for her to wake up so we could get started. But the first thing she did was that she turned and looked and me, and she said, ‘Please don’t rape me.’”

Hannibal keeps his face carefully neutral.

“It took me a minute, you know, to know what to say to that. Then I told her, ‘I’m not going to. Don’t worry about that. I’m just going to hurt you some, and then I’m going to kill you.’

“She calmed down a lot after I said that. That’s awful, isn’t it?”

“It’s not surprising,” Hannibal says, “that a woman who has been abducted might expect to be subjected to sexual violence, it happens so often. And that’s a common pathology, in serial killers.”

“Well, it’s nothing that’s a part of me,” Will says heatedly. “Or you.”

“I know it. What did you do?”

Will shrugs weakly. “Gave her a needle. Meat’s no good after a big dose like that, but who gives a fuck, yeah? I couldn't handle it.

“That’s what I meant when I told you way back that I didn’t like killing women because they already expect you to hurt them.”

“I understood when you said it.”

“The thing about it is that a lot of the time… the ones that don’t, you know, deserve it? They’re the ones that let me hold it together.”

“Hurting someone who is essentially innocent validates for you the idea that you are a monster, and so you feel less vulnerable.” Hannibal pauses, watching the emotions war on Will’s face, waiting to see what particular flavor of anger will come out on top. He knows that Will believes that he would have rather Hannibal had not worked all of this out, but that a deeper part of him longs towards being understood as much as Hannibal does himself.

He adds mildly, “Do I understand that correctly?”

“You think that it makes any difference to them, to know that they’re being hurt for the sake of balancing my mental health? That they find it noble or fair that they die screaming because I can’t manage my own bullshit?”

“I’m not especially concerned with what they think about it,” Hannibal says baldly. “And I’m not judging you, Will.”

“You ought to be. I’m disgusting.”

“Not to me.”

Will flinches like he’s just been slapped. He doesn’t go to Will; Will has learned how to allow himself to enjoy being touched, but there are times when it is better to allow him space.

Hannibal explains, “I want to make sure I understand what it is like for you, before I ask you something about myself.”

He watches Will attempting to retreat into his therapist persona. “You want confirmation that most of the time I am acting as a vigilante, at least in my own mind, and the rest of the time it’s a *really* maladaptive coping mechanism.”

“That’s close enough to what I am asking, yes.”

“Then that’s essentially true,” Will allows. “But I don’t do the other - the last part - very often anymore. I haven’t in a long time. I’ve mostly grown out of it.”

Hannibal feels a stab of frustrated annoyance. “You don’t have to lie to me about that, Will. You told me, the first time we set down together after what happened in the basement, that you used the marks I put on you to invoke pity and lure someone home. Don’t you remember saying that?”

“That’s different,” Will says, anxious and retreating further into poor excuses. “I was in a bad place.”

“Yes. I was the one who put you there.”

“We aren’t having this conversation tonight,” Will says. He reaches to rub at the bridge of his nose, but when he tries to flex his hand the pain stops him. He swipes at it with the side of his wrist instead. “I know, Hannibal, that we need to eventually - it’s long overdue - but not tonight, alright?”

“That’s fine, Hannibal says. “I’d like to ask my question, though.”

“Go on, then.”

“I want to kill again,” Hannibal says. “With you.”

“But?”

“But what if I’m not especially interested in doing so for moralistic reasons?”

Will frowns. “I don’t understand the question.”

Hannibal says, “What if I don't really care if the person in question did something really, objectively bad, beyond offending me, and what if it isn't something that I *need*, if it isn't a compulsion and it isn't instrumental the way it is for you?

“What if I just want to because I want to - because I enjoy it?

“Are you able to accept that?”

There’s a smile tugging at the end of Will’s mouth, but the center wants to curl into something less pleased. He shakes his head in dumbfounded wonderment. “You’re something else. I mean, you are really something.”

There is, in Hannibal, trepidation that would like to bloom into hurt outrage. He stomps on it carefully. “That’s not much of an answer.”

“You were right, what you said in the basement, weren’t you? You really are the real thing. I’m a wind-up doll next to you.”

Hannibal sits up straighter. His posture is princely and proud.

Nonetheless, he tells Will, "I was trying to undermine your confidence. Don't sell yourself short at this late date."

“Are you worried that I’ll leave you, if I realize that you’re a more authentic monster than I am?”

“I don’t think you’ll leave, no.”

“But I might resent you.”

Hannibal nods. “Or fear me, more than you already do.”

“I’m not afraid of you,” Will says, reflexively.

“Stop lying.”

“Hannibal.”

His hand comes up, moving quickly but without violence as it reaches out to touch the scar on Will’s face. Will shies away as though from a blow.

“I’ve forgiven you,” Hannibal says, standing to put distance between himself and Will, “for what happened in the basement.

“But you haven’t forgiven me.”

Chapter 2

Will gives Hannibal space.

He goes to bed before Hannibal, and pretends to already be asleep when he joins Will an hour later. Will keeps out of his way the next morning; he tells himself that he isn't hiding, and almost believes it.

It's Hannibal who comes to him, early in the afternoon.

"You'll help with lunch?"

"I'll offer moral support," Will says. His annoyance with his hands is almost old hat by now. "What are we having?"

He knows, of course.

Hannibal doesn't answer. He disappears from the doorway.

Will follows a little behind. When he gets to the kitchen, Hannibal has already taken the meat from the fridge and unwrapped it. It's a hodgepodge of cuts, and none of them good. Will can imagine how little meat there was on Grutas, how Hannibal must have had to carve what few scraps he could find away from the bone and gristle.

"I've worked with less than choice meat before," Hannibal says, "but absent a sausage maker I don't know what to do with this."

Will considers and then promptly rejects suggesting a meat and beans soup. They are, he hopes, moving away from Hannibal's past experiences and into something new - maybe even something healing - with this.

"Bundle it together in some cotton netting and treat it like pork shoulder," Will suggests.

Hannibal takes out the netting. "Citrus 'pork,'" he says, the quotation marks clear in his voice.

"Marinade it with oranges and lemons," Will agrees. Already, his legs are tired. He uses the sides of his palms to pull out a kitchen chair and push it next to the counter, a few feet away from Hannibal. "The juice will begin to soften the fibers in the meat before it's even in the oven. Then cook at a low temperature for the rest of afternoon. Use a lot of garlic to mask the flavor."

"I don't need to hide from what it is."

"Maybe not, but I'd like to gussy it up. That soup you made tasted like the old bastard was already more than halfway into the grave when you killed him."

"He was extremely feeble. Does that bother you?"

“Fuck no, hun. Old Nazi is still a Nazi. Only one that’s fussed about it is my taste buds.”

Hannibal puts the meat aside and takes down a cutting board. Will watches him navigate the kitchen, retrieving the oranges and taking a knife from the block. “Why you so fixated on horrifying me lately?” Will asks. “That’s my shtick.”

“If you’re spoiling for an argument, statistically speaking the kitchen is a bad place to choose.”

“Cute,” Will says, acidly. He ignores the anxious flutter in his chest. “‘Don’t fight in the kitchen, that’s where most people get stabbed since the knives live there.’

“I’m not trying to pick a fight.”

“Good,” Hannibal says, without looking up from his work.

Will says, “But you were right, about what you said yesterday. I guess I haven’t entirely gotten over you beating the shit out of me.”

There’s a flicker of motion across Hannibal’s face, but nothing distinct enough for Will to read. Will goes on. “That’s not really fair of me, is it?”

He doesn’t answer directly. “Every time I’ve tried to apologize, you’ve told me that I’m being stupid - that you deserved everything I did to you. What was it you called me? ‘Twisted up idiot martyr,’ wasn’t it?”

Hannibal sniffs. “You dismiss your own emotions and insult me in the process.”

Will knows this is the truth.

“I’m trying to work on that. Will you let me?”

The blade carves through the fruit mercilessly. “Go ahead.”

“It was my fault.”

Hannibal gives a short, almost voiceless laugh.

“I was unspeakably ugly to you. I did… so many things that I shouldn’t have done, that I wish I could take back.”

Will wets his lips and waits for Hannibal to reply. He can see the scars his face left on Hannibal’s knuckles, flexing with the movements of Hannibal’s hands as he uses the knife.

When he doesn’t say anything, Will goes on. “But the thing is that I did all of that because I thought that you were a threat to me - you *were* a threat, point of fact. It was stupid of me, how I tried to handle the situation, but I was trying to stay in control of things and protect myself. I was spiralling.”

“I know you were.” The knife stops moving for long enough for Hannibal to cast his gaze at Will. “I spent about sixty hours mentally preparing myself to be vivisected, Will.”

“I know it,” Will says quickly. “Christ. And I know - I know that I wouldn’t have had to to worry about any of it if I just didn’t do the things I do.

“But I never *wanted* to hurt you, even if I tried to convince myself otherwise. That’s what I’m trying to explain.” He pauses, waiting - hoping - for some sort of acknowledgment, before adding, “You understand that, don’t you?”

“I understood it at the time,” Hannibal says, and Will can tell that he feels insulted - that he has taken Will’s question as an implication that he lacked the ability to read the situation he’d found himself in. “But you gave me very little reason to believe that would impact the outcome.”

“You thought I’d have to kill you, though, the same as I did.”

“That was my expectation, yes.” There is a softening to the lines around Hannibal’s mouth. “It was good to find that you’d surprised me.”

It gives Will a bit more courage, but his voice still shakes when he says, “The thing is, I surrendered control to you and you took that opportunity to hurt me.”

Hannibal’s reply comes quickly and without inflection. “You hurt me first.”

“No,” Will says, a helpless denial. “I was careful about that, even when you were unconscious. I didn’t hurt a hair on your head. Not after -”

“Not after you strangled me?”

Will winces.

“I’m not talking about that type of hurting,” Hannibal says. “I wouldn’t have liked it if you’d killed me, but I could have accepted that you saw yourself as having no other choice; I was a threat to you, and it’s natural that you would defend yourself.”

It’s funny, Will reflects, how he despite his own talents he used to believe that Hannibal was difficult to read; his face is nearly entirely impassive now, and his voice is level and calm, but there is a dangerous turmoil in the air. In the set of his eyes and the lines around his mouth there is a wounded outrage, long held in careful check, that might easily slide into vindictive hatred.

“I can take pain, Will, and I'm not especially afraid of dying. But I don’t appreciate being degraded.

"You forced me to make myself vulnerable. I told you more about myself then I’d ever shared with anyone else, and you spent two days using that to ferret out every soft spot you could find to stomp on it.”

“Because I was scared, Hannibal. I didn’t know what to -”

Hannibal cuts him off. “I offered you my love, despite the fact that you had deceived me. I showed you my heart, and it wasn’t enough to tell me that you didn’t want it. You had to insist that I wasn’t mentally competent to understand my own emotions.”

“I shouldn’t have done -”

Hannibal puts the knife down and turns to face him directly. He looks down on Will from the distance of his pride.

“I understand that I’m abnormal, even if you refuse to put a label on whatever it is that’s wrong with me. I’m cold, much of the time, and there are lacunae within my emotional range. I rarely make connections the way that I am ought to - I could count on one hand the times that I have experienced exceptions to that.

“But when I do feel, Will, it is powerful and it is real, but you told me that I didn’t really love you when we both knew that wasn’t true.”

He’s accusing me of gaslighting him, Will realizes. His stomach turns over with sick guilt.

But beneath the nausea there is anger and resentment and wounded fear.

“You left me bleeding on the floor,” Will spits. “You hurt me and then you just *left* , like you didn’t give a shit if I lived or died.”

“I was careful about how I hit you,” Hannibal says, as though to pacify him. “I knew that you’d be fine.”

Will shakes his head with a kind of outraged wonder. “But that’s bullshit, Hannibal, come on. Just how infallible do you think you are? If you hit someone upside the head enough times sometimes shit happens.

“I was hurt bad,” Will says, and is infuriated with himself by the shame that admitting this provokes, though it is something that Hannibal already knows perfectly well. “I had a concussion. I was bleeding like a stuck pig. Broken teeth, broken nose, face tore open… It wasn’t a little thing.”

Hannibal is silent. Will would like to respond in kind, but it is as though something inside of him has hemorrhaged; the words come flooding out without his consent.

“Everything hurt so fucking bad, but I had to get upstairs because if I didn’t do that either I was going to to die down there or someone was eventually going to come looking for me, and then I would have been really cooked.”

Will remembers clutching at the banister to pull himself up the stairs. When a new wave of vertigo hit him like a blow he had nearly fallen backwards, and in the brief span of seconds during which the question of if he would be able to regain his balance remained open, he lived a long and terrifying fantasy of how much worse this all might become if he fell head over ass and broke his leg or back.

“I had to spin a story, for all of them - the ambulance crew and the staff at the hospital, the cop who was on duty in the ER, and then I had to tell it all over again when Alana showed up wanting for me to let her comfort me.

“I told them that a one-night stand decided to beat me up, you know? That I couldn’t give them his name because I didn’t know it. Alana figured I’d gotten raped. She kept asking all these coy little questions to try and get me to admit it so we could talk it out.

“It was so fucking sordid and embarrassing and it made everyone treat me exactly the way I can’t stand to be treated, like I’m some pitiable fucking victim who can’t look out for myself.”

“I wondered,” Hannibal says, “if it played out like that. You didn’t seem amenable to questions, when we started to meet again afterwards.”

“Yeah, well,” Will says, but that’s all he can think to add. He’s only been out of bed for a couple of hours, but he feels the exhaustion weighing him down again already, another damned weakness.

“I know that I shouldn’t have done it,” Hannibal says, and there is only the faintest note of accusation to his voice when he adds, “I’ve tried to apologize.”

Will watches him carefully, feeling curiosity surface among the tumult of emotion within himself. It is Will’s understanding that Hannibal and himself are simultaneously exactly alike and utterly different. He knows that, for all their shared geography, there exists incredible gulfs between how Hannibal experiences the world and Will’s own perceptions.

It doesn’t bother Will very much. The differences keep things interesting, and he does not doubt his own ability to close the gap, given enough time and effort.

Will says, “I have… a staggering amount of guilt for what I did to you. Do you feel guilty, Hannibal?”

He sees the flicker of Hannibal’s eyes as he considers lying. “I feel… regretful. It was impulsive of me. Stupid, to let my feelings take control of me in that way. This would have all been easier - you wouldn’t still be frightened of me - if I did things differently.”

There is strain around Hannibal’s eyes when he looks at Will. The shape of those lines, Will knows, spell out fear and trepidation. “Is that adequate?” he asks.

“It’ll do,” Will says. “I can live with that.”

“I hate that I scare you,” Hannibal says.

“I know. I do, too, but I can’t help it. I think that I’m never going to not be a little afraid of you.” Will pauses. “I love you, though.”

“Are you sure that you feel that way?” Hannibal says, and it takes Will a moment to realize that he’s being teased.

“Are you giving me hell, old man? I fucked my hands up, but I can still kick you, you know.”

“You could do a lot more than that, if you put your mind to it, damaged hands or not.”

It’s meant in fun, Will knows, but he catches his lower lip between his teeth. “Yeah, I guess. You really don’t scare easy, do you?”

He can see the slant of Hannibal’s teeth when he smiles in response, and the slight is so endearing that Will has to get up from the chair and go to him.

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"What does this meal mean to you?" Will asks, when he sits down at the table to wait for Hannibal to serve them both.

He's only recently up from his nap, and the wearness in his eyes is no less than what was there when he laid down a few hours earlier. He supposes that Will might have slept through dinner, as he has during his seemingly endless convalescence, had the meal not been so significant. The work that he is putting into being awake and alert for this - to be here for Hannibal, if he is needed - means something.

But his question is not one that Hannibal knows how to answer.

"I can see my own profile taking shape," he says instead.

"Can you?"

"No one will connect Mason with Grutas, but there are commonalities. Removal of the internal organs," Hannibal says. "Mutilation that takes place while the victim is still alive."

Will waits, expression curious. Hannibal goes on.

"A certain degree of familiarity with the internal structure of the human body, but though the knife work is neat there is nonetheless still something of the amateur to it."

"A fledgling killer, still learning what to expect from the living flesh as it parts beneath his hands," Will says.

"I've often observed autopsies, but I've never held the blade myself," Hannibal agrees. "And a body that is still alive behaves in many ways different from that of one that is cold and rotting.

"I would have noted the experimental quality of my own work, so far, but they don't have anyone at the Bureau who is as good as I was."

His knife slices now through the cobbled together roast. "I'll have to be careful," he continues. "I find I enjoy that kind of work too much, and I don't want to become predictable. It might eventually lead the Interpol to our doorstep."

"How hard are they looking for us, do you think? And how long will they keep it up?"

Hannibal considers this as he cuts the meat on Will's plate into bite-sized pieces. "So far as the authorities are aware - or, at least as far as we are aware of what they are aware of - we have between the two of us four murders. That's not small potatoes, and they'll never entirely

stop looking, but they were only murders. If we were heads of some international crime organization or drug syndicate we would be a much higher priority.

“There are two things that concern me. The first is that I am an embarrassment to the Bureau, and the perception that Jack Crawford is incompetent is compounded every day that I stay free.”

“You think he’s holding a grudge?”

“He’s like a dog with a bone at the best of times, but I may have threatened him, when he came to visit me after the trial.”

Will barks laughter. “Jesus, Hannibal. Sometimes your mouth does get the better of you, doesn’t it?”

Hannibal keeps his face placid. “I was entirely sincere,” he says. “I’d come for him tomorrow, if I had any reasonable expectation of getting away with it.”

“Yeah? And who else?”

“The prosecutor who bullied Margot on the stand, the one that made you cry.”

“I let myself cry,” Will says, defensively. “It was part of the act.”

“Of course,” Hannibal agrees, for the sake of avoiding argument. He knows that it was his own seething glare that caused Will to break down on the stand, but that had been part of the act, and necessary.

“I’d still like to see that one dead myself,” Will allows.

“Freddie Lounds, of course.”

“Of course. She’s been on both our lists for a while now.”

“Chilton.”

“Mm-hm. The world would be a better place.”

“Dr. Bloom,” Hannibal says, and watches Will’s face covertly as he serves himself. Hannibal has a desire to keep his own portion small, but he fights this. He has no intention of dropping weight again, or of allowing this meal to frighten him.

Will hesitates. The expression that crosses his face is confused. “Why?”

“She thinks that I am your victim. I’d like to demonstrate to her otherwise.”

Will’s discomfort is tangible. “I’d rather you didn’t.”

“The way she talked about you on the stand was extremely rude, and she was worse when the two of us were alone.”

“I know it,” Will says. “But I don’t want her to get hurt.”

Hannibal shrugs as he lowers himself into his chair, conceding the point easily enough. “I’m only talking, Will. It’s doubtful we’ll ever have an opportunity at any of them, in any case.”

“What’s the other thing that you’re worried about?” Will asks.

He’s angling to change the subject, and Hannibal is happy enough to let him. “I’m more concerned that the same thing that happened last time will happen again - some civilian will happen to recognize one or both of us and contact the authorities.

“I hope, though, that the TV movie that’s coming out next month will work to eliminate at least some of that risk.”

“Everyone who sees it is going to start subconsciously thinking about the actors who played us whenever they think about us. Our faces will be replaced by the actors in their imaginations.”

“Exactly.”

“Good thing for me that I don’t look a thing like Edward Norton,” Will says. “I’m still opting to be offended by the casting, though.”

“Imagine how I feel,” Hannibal sighs.

But dinner is getting cold. Hannibal looks down at his plate and rallies his resolve.

He lifts his knife and fork, uses them.

Takes a bite.

Chews.

Swallows.

Then another.

Hannibal believes that he is handling it all very well, but Will is watching him with a concerned expression, so he supposes something unfortunate must be showing on his face.

Hannibal pauses, waiting for Will to speak.

Will’s own folk hangs suspended over his plate, precarious in his bandaged hand. “Hannibal?” Will says. “Are you alright? Are you going to vomit?”

The vague sense of nausea that had been bubbling in the rear of Hannibal’s stomach attempts to rise with this acknowledgement, but Hannibal pushes it back down where it belongs.

“I was thinking,” he says, “that we ought to have made something a bit different from him. *Schweinebraten* with potato dumplings and sauerkraut, maybe.”

“I don’t get it,” Will says, frowning.

“Well, Grutas always wanted to be German.”

Will’s eyes grow wide, and then he laughs, astonished.

In the past, it was a rare thing for anyone to find any of his grim little jokes genuinely funny, but Hannibal has found that it is easy to make Will laugh. He beams back at Will, making no effort to hide his pleasure.

“You’re so strange,” Will says. “I think I could spend a lifetime happily, just wandering around in your head working out how everything joins up.”

Hannibal turns grave in the space of a heartbeat. “I don’t like the implications of my being opaque to you,” he says. “I want for you to know me.”

“I know you better every day.”

“Maybe I’m stranger than you realize. Maybe I’m too strange to tolerate.”

Will lets out a small laugh. “I highly doubt it,” he says, but Hannibal senses the slightest thread of anxiety in how he reaches for his glass.

He’s taken up with the whiskey again, though Hannibal is fairly certain that he shouldn’t be mixing alcohol with his medications. There is a latent suspicion in Hannibal’s mind that this might in someway be his fault - that his own emotional problems are somehow feeding into whatever ugly feelings eat at Will.

“Why won’t you admit that I’m a psychopath?”

Will’s glass makes a dangerous clinking sound as he sits it back on the table. “I’m not your psychiatrist anymore,” he tells Hannibal.

“As evasions go, doctor, you will forgive me for not finding that especially satisfying.”

“Do you really want the answer?” Will says. “You won’t like it.”

“Tell me,” Hannibal says, and steels himself for a blow.

But what Will says isn’t what he expects.

“You aren’t a psychopath.”

Stubbornness floods Hannibal’s chest. He scoffs. “I fit the pattern.”

“May I finish?” Hannibal nods, stiffly. “The pattern is bullshit. You aren’t a psychopath in the sense that what you think a psychopath is doesn’t exist.

“Psychopathy is a dubious clinical construct in the first place, but the Bureau uses it as a catch-all term for serial killers who have any of a dozen different mental illness or none at all,

and that's not what it means. You might as well use the term 'monster,' since it's about as meaningful and precise. Hell, if I've heard right Crawford's Evil Minds Museum does just that.

"Now. It might be true that most of the men you collared have some pathologies and personality traits in common, but it doesn't follow that those traits are the root cause of their actions; for every person wired in roughly the same way that they are there's thousands of others who never become killers - who are, at worst, prone towards manipulation and troublemaking.

"And here's the other side of the coin; what about people who don't fit the pattern?"

"You're talking about yourself," Hannibal observes.

"I am. Do I strike you as lacking in empathy?"

"No. But your situation is unique."

"How so?"

"You made an active choice to be who you are today. If you'd pursued other interests you might have been someone entirely other from who you are now," Hannibal says.

Will nods. "That's true of anyone - you're a case in point.

"If you hadn't become a cop, you might have went to your grave without ever killing a soul. You never would have met me, most likely, and we wouldn't be walking the path that we are walking together now. It's a matter of chance and circumstance, far more than some innate trait."

"By the same logic I might also have been something far worse than I am."

"That's just as possible," Will agrees.

"I could offer you an alternative diagnosis," he continues, "and I understand that Chilton tried to pin at least half a dozen different labels on you, but the fact of the matter is that C-PTSD explains every problem that you have or have had with your mental health, from the anxiety and depression to the flattened affect and repressed emotions." He pauses, reconsidering. "I don't mean to upset you, but you probably have an eating disorder as well, but that's often comorbid with C-PTSD."

Hannibal swallows around a dryness in his throat. "Chilton said that I am anorexic."

"A broken watch is right twice a day," Will allows. "So that's two things. But the rest? It's just who you are, Hannibal, mixed in with who you choose to be, inasmuch as any of us has a choice in that."

Hannibal picks his fork up again and takes a bite of the roast, His sense of having something to prove even greater than when he set out to make this meal.

Will watches him, his head tilted. “Is any of that helpful for you?”

Mouth full, Hannibal nods thoughtfully.

Chapter End Notes

These two have a lot to talk out, I suppose, though we'll hopefully be getting into a bit more action soon. I hope, in the mean time, that they aren't boring anyone.

Chapter 4

The nightmare is different every time, yet always the same.

This time, Hannibal is opened up before Will, dying with quiet resignation under his blade. Will turns to the sink when it is over with, intending to wash the viscera and blood from his hands, and sees his father's face reflected back at him in the mirror.

He wakes with a rusty cry.

Hannibal is there, as he always is, reaching out in the darkness to brush fingers against his skin, checking if Will is safe to touch - if the touch that Will needs so badly, in his bloody panic, is something that Will can stand.

Will clutches at Hannibal despite the way it hurts his hands.

"Christ," Will moans. "When is this going to stop?"

Hannibal is silent in the darkness. Will is so focused on trying to regain control of his frantic heart and shivering body - on allowing Hannibal's touch to calm him - that he does not at first notice that something is wrong.

Hannibal does not tremble; instead, his muscles are rigid and taunt, his skin chill to the touch from a thin sheen of sweat.

Will reaches out and switches on the reading lamp. Hannibal is pallid under the glare of its light. "Did I scare you?" Will asks, knowing as he speaks that this is the wrong question.

When he sees the glassiness of Hannibal's eyes something clicks into place for Will.

"Nightmares for you too, yeah?"

Before they began to sleep together regularly, Hannibal told Will that he was prone towards both insomnia and night terrors (though Hannibal had not used the latter term), but neither of these problems has surfaced in Will's company. It had been a point of pride and a great reassurance for Will that there is something about his presence that allows Hannibal untroubled rest.

Will wonders what has changed.

"For how long?" he asks, when Hannibal doesn't answer.

"Since Grutas."

Will feels no surprise at this. *This is part of why he's been on edge,* he thinks, and curses himself for not catching on sooner. "You never told me how that went," he says.

“He was dead within minutes,” Hannibal says, and Will can feel the fierce, bitter anger rise in him, nearly tactile. That Will knows that it is not meant for him is just enough to keep him calm.

“You feel cheated. Dissatisfied by the outcome.”

“When I was a boy, there were stretches of years when the only thing that could calm me down enough to sleep would be to think about what I might do to Grutas and his friends. I imagined myself triumphant - righteous, powerful, bloody.

“Much of what I did to Mason was an application of those fantasies,” Hannibal adds, as an afterthought.

“But it was different than it was with Mason?”

“When I killed Mason, I didn’t feel as though it had changed me in any fundamental way. It was a confirmation of what I’d always known; if anything, it came as a relief. And the trucker was a final acceptance - of myself and of you and the shape that our lives together could be expected to take.

“What happened with Grutas feels entirely different. And… I’ve felt different since then.

“I think,” Hannibal says, “that I was afraid of him. I was afraid of what he might say, so I did not allow him to speak. But then I was afraid also of what he might see on my face or infer from my actions…”

“That he might become aware of some vulnerability in you. You wanted him to understand how he had hurt you, but at the same time you couldn’t stomach the idea that he might derive some satisfaction from your admission of that hurt.”
“What I did to him would have killed him quickly, regardless, but he died before I was ready. I feel like he got away from me - that I allowed him to get away too easily, and without any real understanding…”

Hannibal comes to a halt, and Will steps in, tentative. “I felt something like that after I killed my father,” Will tells him. “Not right away. For a while, I just felt relief that he was gone and that I had apparently gotten away with it. And I was… happily - quite happily - lost in wonderment with myself, the discovery that I had enough power inside of myself to rid my life of him.

“But eventually, the fact that it had gone so quickly started to weigh on me. He’d barely understood, I think, that I was the one killing him, let alone why I was doing it, and I regretted that. It weighed me down for a long time.”

“How did you make it stop?”

“To a certain degree, you can’t. You just have be satisfied with the measure of vengeance that you got, and forgive yourself that things didn’t go exactly as you might have liked. That took me a while, when it came to my father.

“But,” Will adds brightly, “I could only kill my old man once. You still have another old Nazi to bag.”

“Kolnas,” Hannibal says.

“Last one pays for all,” Will says, hoping, as he says it, that this is the truth. “I’ll be well enough to travel soon. We’ll get him, Hannibal.”

“It never really occurred to me that I might have such an opportunity,” Hannibal says. “I’m grateful that you gave me that, Will, but I should have taken it for myself years - decades - ago.” His lip curls, an open snarl. “I’ve allowed them all to escape unpunished into the grave ahead of me, everyone but Kolnas and Grutas, and Grutas… The taste is bitter.”

“You dream of Mischa.”

“Yes.”

“And?”

“She’s starving. She is nothing but hunger and… thousands of sharp, little teeth. She wants to eat me.”

Hannibal’s eyes are shadowed pits, looking back at Will, pleading.

“That sounds horrifying,” Will says, knowing that it is not enough; that there are no words, no matter how sincere or carefully crafted, powerful enough to soften the blow of such things.

He presses his body against Hannibal’s, curling on arm around his shoulders, and lets Hannibal rest the side of his head against his chest. That helps, at least a little bit, and after a time Hannibal speaks.

It is to shift the conversation, but that’s alright. “Same old nightmare for you?”

“Yeah. Same old shit, just a new flavor.” And because he can’t help it, Will adds, “I’m sorry.”

“It’s interesting, don’t you think,” Hannibal says, and he snuggles in even closer to Will, “that you never have nightmares about my hurting you - just the other way around?

“Maybe you’re less frightened of me than you think.”

Chapter 5

A new bed in a new place, and this is, Hannibal reflects as he runs his hands over Will's back, in some fundamental way a new relationship.

They are in bed together, the both of them naked in the dim lighting of the ship's cabin, and Hannibal is straddling Will's upper thighs as he massages his shoulders.

Will isn't nearly as tense as Hannibal usually finds him to be. There is something about the moment of the great ship that is soothing to Will, he has come to understand. It brings out in Will a degree of steady, reliable peace that Hannibal has rarely seen him enjoy, and never for such a long stretch of days. It pleases Hannibal, though he is still eager to reach their destination.

As though Will has read his thoughts, he squirms in the cage of Hannibal's limbs until he is laying on his back. He looks at Hannibal, his expression self-indulgent and fanciful, and says, "We ought to get a houseboat. A fast one. We see any trouble coming we can just cast off and leave the cops fuming on the dock while we sail off to someplace new."

Hannibal lets Will see his smile, unrestrained, at the idea. Granting him such allowances has by now become reflexive.

"Coastguard," he says, regretfully. "And police choppers."

"You're no fun," Will says, and bats Hannibal's bicep lightly with the back of his hand as though annoyed. He turns over onto his stomach again.

"That aside, it isn't a bad idea," Hannibal continues. He traces the trajectory of the scars on Will's back, and he shivers beneath him. "So many scars that you didn't have before you met me," he muses.

"We've both been marked," Will agrees. "Neither of us are the same people that we were before.

"There's an easiness to you that wasn't there when I first met you. The way you used to hold yourself, it was like you were worried that you'd break out of your own skin if you moved the wrong way, and everyone would see what was underneath.

"You aren't like that anymore. At first, you only started to loosen up when we were alone together, but in the months since you've been free there's been such a change in you, even with strangers."

"That started in the prison. I thought… everyone already knows what I did, so why worry that I might do or say something that might tip them off to what I am really like? From there, it became much easier to stop feeling concerned that others - people who didn't know - would clock me." Hannibal does not tell Will that it began with him thinking about how Will would act in his situation.

“It makes me happy,” Will says, and yawns and stretches beneath him.

He’s quiet for a little while, basking in Hannibal’s touch, the warmth of skin against skin. When Will speaks again it is to ask, “I’m different, too, aren’t I?” The question is almost coy. Shy. He wants, Hannibal knows, to be reassured that he is better than he was.

Hannibal pries at Will’s shoulder until he turns over onto his back again. He smiles down at Will, and Will thinks, *That’s the look of a man looking at the most beautiful thing he has ever seen.* He has yet to come to the boundary of his amazement that Hannibal should be able to see him clearly and feel this way about what he is looking at, and doubts that he ever will. The feeling strikes him being as endless as the horizon.

“You are kintsugi,” Hannibal tells him, taking Will’s hands in his own.

Since the bandages came off, Hannibal has made a point of touching Will’s hands. Hannibal massages them at least twice a day, to ward off the stiffness that threatened to close over his joints, but he finds other excuses to touch them as well. He brushes Will’s fingers with his own in passing, and reaches for Will’s hand whenever they are close. He does not wish for Will to be more ashamed of the scars than he needs to be.

He kisses Will’s hand now, lips traversing the scars. Will laughs, ticklish, and yanks his hand away.

“I’m what?” he asks, more serious.

“Broken pottery, mended with gold, and made all the more beautiful for it. You are art.”

“I’m a scarred up mess, is what I am,” Will says, but Hannibal can tell that he is pleased.

He deserves to be proud, Hannibal believes. Will has been cracked against his will in one new place after another by everything that has happened since Hannibal learned his secrets, but he has made an active decision to pull himself back together.

Hannibal has seen the change, which began when they left the United States, really take root in the three weeks since the cruise ship left port in Italy. It is not as tactile as the changes that took place on Hannibal’s own body in the months after his escape from prison, that still continues as he regains muscle mass that he lost during that time, but there is something similar to it; it is the filling in of things that were missing and spaces that had been empty. It is a return to something approaching wholeness, or at least as close as Will dares to come.

Hannibal is acutely aware of how much it costs him, and he knows too how much of that effort has been for his own sake. If it were only his own life on the line, Hannibal suspects that Will would have given up and allowed himself to go under long before now.

“What do you want to do?” Hannibal asks him.

“I’m awfully weary,” Will tells him, regretfully. “I’m afraid I’m not up for much.”

And Hannibal, who can feel that Will is already half hard beneath him, says, “Seems like you’re just about up for something.”

“You are unbelievable,” Will says, but there’s laughter dancing in his eyes. “Get off of me.”

Hannibal rolls onto his side, and Will turns his own body to face him.

“I didn’t mean that you should go that far away,” Will tells him, so Hannibal comes closer again.

He trials his fingers down Will’s stomach, following the trail of hair. “Is this alright? Should I go on?”

“Yeah,” Will tells him, his pale cheeks flushed red from bashfulness or desire or some combination of both. “I’d like that. But you have to let me, too…”

Hannibal feels Will’s fingers flutter past the tangled bullet scar on his stomach without touching it, to reach lower and brush tentatively against the base of his cock.

It’s been awhile since they’ve done this - the last time was more than three months ago, just before Will became seriously ill, and the interim has made Will shy.

“Touch me,” Hannibal tells him, and as though to demonstrate he takes Will’s cock in hand.

What happens next counts among the most astonishing things Hannibal has ever experienced.

Will meets his eyes as he grasps Hannibal’s cock in his own hand, and in his eyes there is a hyperfocus, all of it directed at Hannibal, yet there is something misty there, too, and distant. When Hannibal begins to move his hand, Will mimics him stroke for stroke, every touch a perfect mirror of what Hannibal does, and before very long Hannibal no longer has the sense that Will is copying him, always just a heartbeat behind, but rather that he is anticipating exactly what Hannibal’s hand on his cock will do before he does it.

Hannibal’s breathing begins to pick up and so does Will’s. There are little twitches of errant emotion flickering across Will’s face now, early signs that he is getting overwhelmed, that pleasure is sliding towards something fiercer and more difficult to define, but Hannibal keeps his own face calm, and after a view moments Will matches his expressions, too.

It is astounding to Hannibal, and he lets some of the bliss that he is feeling - the joy at having Will here with him and touching him in this way - show on his own face, and sees it reflected on Will’s own. It is rawer in Will, but it is unmistakably Hannibal’s own expression.

When he sees Will slipping again towards that sense of being engulfed by his own feelings, the connection threatening to break, Hannibal makes his face calm and says, “Be peaceful, Will,” and Will is.

He is tranquil, because Hannibal is, and there is none of the clawing at the linens, and no desperate need to sink his teeth into his own flesh or Hannibal’s to ground himself. Will does not cry out; he comes with a contented sigh that matches Hannibal’s own, at the same time or perhaps a moment before or after Hannibal does the same.

He is under my skin, Hannibal thinks. *He’s in my bones.*

Hannibal pulls himself against Will, heedless of the mess, wanting - needing - to get as near to him as is humanly possible, and he feels Will’s damaged hands clutch him closer in return.

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The cruise ship disembarks in Rio de Janeiro, and Will and Hannibal leave the boat behind, pets and bags in tow.

They board a taxi, which carries them twenty miles along the coast, to the very margins of the territory frequented by respectable tourists, until they come to the ramshackle little beach house.

It is not especially clean or well-maintained, that beach house, and almost from the instant they step through the doors Hannibal takes it upon himself to correct this problem. He is an efficient agent of cleanliness, moving from room to room with quick and determined grace.

Will is not nearly so productive. He frets, getting up to peer out the window and down the drive again and again, though their visitors are not due until later that evening.

The fifth time Hannibal catches Will doing this, he says Will's name, quiet and questioning. When Will looks towards him, Hannibal says, "The bed's made up. Why don't you lay down and take a nap? You look tired."

The truth is that he looks awful. Ever since Will spoke with Margot last week, something which he did in private, he's been spiralling. Hannibal has become accustomed to Will's periodic lows - has had to accept that he does not yet have the same power to lift Will's depression in the way that being with Will has in large part dispelled his own - but this is something other. There is dread and helpless resignation and something like mourning weighing upon Will now.

It has not been hard to guess why, but Hannibal has not tried to force a conversation.

Hannibal's own sadness sits in the center of his gut like a tight fist, contained there. It has been a struggle to make himself eat as much as he knows that he ought to eat with the weight of that sadness filling his stomach.

Now, Will stands with his back to Hannibal, staring out the window from behind the edge of the curtains, and says, "This is a pretext, you know. I'm better now - I don't need to see the doctor, and Margot doesn't need to travel with him, let alone bring Tommy along with her."

And Hannibal, who knows as well as Will does that he is by no means fully recovered, says, "If your illness provides an excuse to visit with family then that much at least is a silver lining."

"This will be the last time," Will says, without turning, "that I see Margot in the flesh and the last time I see Tommy whatsoever - the last time he can be allowed to see my face or hear my voice."

The words seem to choke him, and Will is not able immediately to go on. “It’s too dangerous,” he says finally. “Margot and I are in agreement about that.”

Which, Hannibal thinks, means he talked Margot into going along with it.

When he says nothing, Will continues. “It’s not just that she might get slapped with an abetting or accessory charge if she’s linked to us, though that’s an unacceptable risk all by itself.

“It’s Tommy,” he says, with an aching sadness. “He’s just too smart for his own good.”

Will teases the problem out point by point, with a practicality that doesn’t really belie the despair that underpins his words. The boy is getting older, and he is so insightful, and it will only be a couple of years - maybe less - before he’ll be grown enough to ask difficult questions. Those questions might be dangerous to them all, but their answers would be disastrous for the boy.

“How long until he starts to realize that there’s something strange about my comings and goings? He won’t have to happen upon my face in some news report or online article to realize that something serious is going on beneath the surface, and he’ll dig - he won’t be able to help himself. He’s brilliant, Hannibal, and he’s intuitive.”

“You’re his father.”

And he thinks, If you’d stopped after the boy was born this situation wouldn’t exist. His anger on Tommy’s behalf surprises him. It is not rational; after all, it is very likely that Hannibal would not have Will now if he had stopped. If Will had stopped, Hannibal never would have had the opportunity to begin to really understand his true self, nor would the two of them have been able to come so close to really understanding one another.

Will winces as though Hannibal has spoken an accusation out loud. “That’s the biggest reason why this needs to end. He can’t know what I am - not even the little bit that the feds have cottoned to. He can’t be allowed to know that, especially if he understands who I am to him.

“It’s awful for a child to know that his father is a monster.” Will curls his arms around himself; he looks terribly lonely and much younger than his years. His voice is shaky. “It does things.”

“It’s awful for a child to have his father taken away, too.”

Will goes stony at that. Hannibal sees him willing himself back together, but only so he can draw the vulnerable parts of himself back inside his shell. “This is for the best,” and Hannibal recognizes the same tone of forced heartlessness that Will tried to use to shield himself when they were in his basement. “If I cut it off now it’ll hurt less in the long run.”

Chapter End Notes

Just a little one today, but I wanted to give you guys an update today since it's been a bit.

Good news; I found the missing plot arc that I need to make this a REALLY interesting story. Quite a lot in store for these boys yet... :))))

Chapter 7

Through the spyhole, Will watches Margot's driver get out of the front and open the backdoor of the vehicle. Margot gets out, drawing Tommy out after her, and then the driver gets back in the car. She turns the car around in the drive and turns out on to the road, and it is only when the car has faded from sight that Margot turns and leads the boy up the walkway to the front door.

Will pulls the door open before she can knock.

"Margot," Will says warmly, and lets her pull him into a hug. She holds onto him for a long time - longer than Will likes to be held for, even by her - but he lets her do it.

Behind them, Hannibal asks, "Where is Cordell?"

"He'll be along in a few hours," Margot answers. "I wanted us to have some time alone."

"And the driver's trustworthy?"

"She doesn't know who I'm visiting with, of course. I think she's decided I have a lover."

Will steps back, holding Margot at arms length so he can study her face. "And do you?"

Her smile is shy, almost girlish.

Will grins in response. "That's fantastic news, Margot. I'm so glad."

He crouches then, bringing himself eye-level to Tommy, his gloved hands folded in front of himself. Tommy is staring at those gloves, curious but not yet worried, and Will chunks him under the chin so he raises his eyes to meet Will's own. The gesture makes him acutely aware of the way the dark leather precludes the humanness of the touch of skin on skin.

Will feels inhuman. He feels like a flayed corpse, far too damaged to be viewed by delicate company. He feels like he is made of ice.

But he makes himself smile. He hides these things, as well as he can - as well as anything can be hidden from Tommy. He wants so badly for this one last time they will see each other to be good - to be fun and easy and light as helium balloons and angel food cake.

"How you doing, sunshine?"

The boy shifts his weight on his feet uncertainty, his entire body swaying like a reed in an unsteady breeze.

It has been nearly a year since they saw each other face to face, and Will has not spoken with him via video chat since he admitted to himself and to Hannibal that he was ill; at first, Will hadn't wanted to frighten the boy with his sickness, worried that he might do or say something alarming or damaging to him. Later… Will had been afraid.

That fear seems justified now. He has decided, yes, that the best thing for them all moving forward is that Tommy be allowed to forget him, but the possibility that this has already come to pass makes him cold from the inside out, as though ice water has been pumped into his veins.

Who am I to him, anyway, Will thinks, *that I should expect to be remembered?* He is a friendly friend of Tommy's mother, one who used to come for visits once or twice a month but who has since disappeared almost completely, and he is on occasion the man on the other side of the screen who can, when Tommy is upset, help him to tease out his feelings until he understands them well enough to find some relief. That is all.

But then something brightens in the boy's eyes. "Will!" he says, like an epiphany, and throws himself into Will's arms.

Will scopes the boy up. He knew, intellectually, that Tommy would have gotten bigger, and Will's eyes have confirmed that much already, but the real, tangible weight of him is nonetheless astounding.

"Didn't recognize me for a second there, did you?" Will asks, making the question sound light.

"You look different!" Tommy agrees.

It's true. Will's hair is shaggy now, longer than he's ever let it get before, and deliberately unkempt. There is a scattering of grey hairs near his temples. He has grown his beard out to half an inch long, as well, to hide his scar as best as it can be hidden.

It all serves to aid him from being identified, but sometimes when Will looks in the mirror he feels as though he has lost himself. He is thinner than he used to be as well, and even iron supplements and hours spent sunning himself on the deck of the cruise ship has not returned the color to his skin.

Hitching Tommy up on his hip, Will leads them out to the sandy backyard, which is abutted by the ocean. Margot and Hannibal follow behind, speaking quietly, already lost in conversation with one another. They settle into a pair of worn deck chairs, while Will and Tommy continue on to the water's edge.

Will puts the boy on his feet in the sand and then stoops to take his own shoes and socks off. He rolls up the legs of his jeans, the fine leather gloves interfering only slightly with the delicate work, and Tommy copies him.

The damp sand sticks to the fingers of Will's gloves, and Will sees Tommy watching his hands worriedly.

Will remembers the first time Tommy saw the scar Hannibal left on his face, the way his small fingers patted tentatively at the skin around it before tracing the mark with a finger tip. Will was careful to regulate his emotions; he hadn't let himself think about how upset the scar made him, and so Tommy had not been upset, but only curious.

The boy was younger then, easier to fool.

It's different with Will's hands. The boy is troubled by the gloves, but he accepts - not the presence of the gloves themselves, but that he will not be given an answer as to why Will is wearing them. It's a fretful, helpless kind of acceptance, and the boy's uneasiness does not dispel, despite Will's efforts to distract him. Will knows how secrets nettle more painfully than the truth, but he can't bear the shame of trying to explain what he did to himself to the boy, so he does not answer the unspoken questions.

The two of them have a good time anyway.

They wade in the mellow waves, walking along the beach, and there are shorebirds to see and scuttling sand crabs and other small living things, and there are seashells to pick up stuff into their pockets.

Will takes them further than he knows they ought to go, so reluctant is he to put an end to this. By the time the beach gives way to giant boulders and a rocky cliff too steep to climb, Tommy is worn out and Will himself is utterly exhausted. He looks back the way they have come; the house is a distant blur in the hazzy heat of midday.

"Let's go back and find your Mom, yeah?"

They are only halfway back when Tommy's feet start to drag, and Will picks him up and carries him. Almost immediately, the boy begins to doze off in Will's arms.

There's a sharp rock buried in the sand, and when Will's heel descends upon it he stumbles, briefly. Against his shoulder, Tommy mumbles sleepily, "Dad?" and Will goes on walking, pretending that he did not hear.

When they come into Hannibal and Margot's line of sight, Hannibal stands and strides down the beach to meet them.

"I'll take him," Hannibal says, but Will is unwilling to let go, despite his exhaustion. He shakes his head silently and goes on, climbing the incline towards the house.

He lowers himself into one of the spare beach chairs, Tommy still asleep in his arms. "Just tired is all," he says, apologetic. Then he yawns hugely.

It's not very long before Will falls asleep in the sun, Tommy curled against his chest.

As he sits talking with Margot, Hannibal keeps a careful eye on Will, watching him for twitches or tics.

"Why are you staring?" Margot asks.

Hannibal wets his lips, wondering how much he ought to say. He's quite certain that Will and the boy are sound asleep. "He has nightmares," Hannibal confides. "When that happens, he

sometimes thrashes or lashes out with his fists. Once, he caught me across the nose hard enough to draw blood.

“He’s alright now, though. I’ll just keep track of his breathing.”

Margot says softly, “You know why he does that.”

“I suppose that I do,” Hannibal allows. “But we do not speak about it.”

There are things that Hannibal suspects about Will and his father - about Will’s difficulties with touch and his enraged terror at even the idea of being restrained, problems that have even now not gone away entirely and which Hannibal understands most likely never will.

Hannibal will never ask. Will, he knows, will never tell him. That’s just fine.

“He knows Will is his father,” Margot says.

“It’s not unusual,” Hannibal says carefully, “that absent a clearly defined father figure a boy his age would assume that the man who pays a considerable amount of attention to him is by default his father. When I was no older than fourteen it would often occur that the very small children would need to be dissuaded from the idea that I was their father.”

“That’s not very surprising, no,” Margot allows. “But the thing is, he *knows* that he isn’t supposed to know. He slipped up a few times now - said ‘dad’ when he knows that he should have said ‘Will.’ Then he tries to correct himself, or casts these little glances at me to check if I noticed.”

Hannibal feels a spark of pride for the boy.

“You must have anticipated this, the both of you, when you decided that Will would be the donor.”

Margot sparks into cold anger. “What I anticipated,” she says, her voice cool and impersonal, “was eventually explaining to him that the circumstances of his conception were a bit unusual, but that Will and I love each other, though we are not in love, and that we both love him.

“That’s a conversation the three of us might have had together a year ago, if not even sooner, if not for -”

She pauses, not wanting to risk voicing the truth near the boy even while he is sleeping. “I should think that you are able appreciate everything that I could not anticipate, given what information was kept from me.”

Hannibal doesn’t answer, but he inclines his head slowly, conceding the point.

“I can’t see how meetings like these are sustainable,” Margot continues, and Hannibal understands that she is fully in agreement with every conclusion Will has reached.

“Have you considered the possibility that it might not matter all that much if he finds out?” Hannibal presses. “Children are adaptable. They accept what the adults around them accept as being the normal way of the world.”

Margot’s composure up to this point has been impeccable, but now she draws dignity around herself like a cloak and shield. “I don’t want,” she says, her voice clipped and aristocratic, “my son to accept the things that Will has done as being 'normal.'”

There is an unsteadiness that comes upon Hannibal, a sense of disorientation as profound as having a rug ripped out from under his feet, when he realizes that he has been entirely blind to the moral content of a discussion, that he has missed entirely something obvious to more normal people. He feels that now.

“Will told me the truth would scar Tommy,” he says, and is ashamed by uncertainty in his own voice. “I thought he believed the boy too fragile to bear an ugly truth. That’s wrong, isn’t it? Will meant that the truth would render Tommy ugly by association.”

Margot sees that it is difficult for him, and she is kind to him. Hannibal supposes that she loves him, too. “Isn’t that how you felt when the scales fell from your own eyes?”

Hannibal hears the echo of his own voice. *I felt dirtied,* he’d told Will, and that was the visceral truth of it, but there was more to it than that. During his sessions with Will, Hannibal had begun to believe for the first time in his life that maybe there wasn’t all that much that was innately wrong and wicked about himself - or, at least, that his internal badness counted for less than the good that he’d worked upon the world in saving lives. Learning the truth of Will undermined all of that, rendering every reassurance suspect, and this had at first been cause for bitterness.

It is not that Hannibal wishes to go back to that state of ignorance. There is nothing that he desires less. Nor does he doubt that he has found, with Will, his own authentic self; he is learning to revel in that true self, to delight in the power and beauty of it, and under no circumstances does he intend surrender that.

But when he accepted the monster on Will’s back - and, by association, the monster inside of himself - Hannibal gave up on something else. That something had been small and weak, perhaps entirely the product of wishful thinking on his part, but letting it go changed him in a fundamental way.

Hannibal knows that Will did not take that nameless thing from him deliberately; quite the opposite, Will fought tooth and nail in his desperation to stop Hannibal from allowing it to slip from his hands and shatter.

But it is gone now, nonetheless, however unmourned. He wonders now what it cost Margot to accept the both of them, if it was more precious to her, whatever it was, and he understands why Will does not wish to steal that thing from his boy when Tommy is still too young to defend himself.

Still. It is bitter, seeing Will and the boy sleeping together in the rattan chair like a pair of weary puppies in a basket, knowing it will never happen again. Hannibal finds that he cannot,

despite all he knows, accept it.

Chapter 8

There's an old clock hanging on the wall in the kitchen, and while he and Tommy work on getting dinner together, Will finds himself staring at it, trying to will the hands to move backwards, or at least to slow down.

He hasn't dared to ask when Cordell ought to be expected, or if Margot intends that she and Tommy leave with him when Will's check-up is complete. Internally, he berates himself for dreading the parting, when he is the one who first argued for the necessity of it.

Tommy is sitting at the table, peeling apples, and Will ruffles his hair as he passes the boy on his way to the backyard, intending to tell Hannibal and Margot that dinner will be ready in about fifteen minutes.

They have been thick as thieves, those two, since Margot and Tommy arrived. That is another thing to regret, that Hannibal and Margot will no longer be able to sit together and talk with one another. Neither of them have had much opportunity for friendship in their lives.

Will does not mean, really, to snoop, but they are engrossed in their conversation and he is naturally light on his feet.

Through the screen door, Will hears Margot's voice.

"He picked you over us," she is saying. "I won't pretend that doesn't sting."

Will freezes. *Is that what I did?* he wonders, and the enemy inside of him perks up its head and turns to study Will for weaknesses.

He waits in silence to find if he will be defended.

"It's not that simple," Hannibal responds.

"Nothing about any of this is simple," Margot agrees. "But it is, nonetheless, the truth.

"Will didn't have to go on the run with you the first time. Would you have been caught sooner, if he'd cut you loose on your own after they figured out that you'd killed Mason? Probably, but Will didn't *have to* go with you.

"There were any number of other courses of action he might have taken, some of which might actually have given you better odds of not being arrested, and others that might have eliminated any chance of his being connected back to Mason's death or any other crime."

"Will's not inclined towards half-measures. When decides to do something, he throws his entire self into it.

"At the time," Hannibal goes on, his voice slow and thoughtful, "I suggested that he might kill me and claim self-defense."

Will can see neither of them, but he has no difficulty picturing the look on Margot's face now. "How was that idea received?"

"Poorly."

"I can imagine." There is a pause. "He didn't have to break you out, either - he might have just let everything go back to normal."

"I know it. You helped him with that. Your help was indispensable."

"I didn't have to, either. I made my choices, the same as he did."

Hannibal is quiet.

Margot says, "I'm not criticizing him - please understand that. I'm glad Will made the choices he did; I don't think I could have forgiven him for any of this if I knew he'd abandoned you after what happened with Mason, and I never would have been able to trust the idea that he really cares about any of us if he'd let you hang."

"I needed him more than you did, and I still do. That's what decided it."

"I know. But it hurts."

"Listen, Margot, there has to be a way that we can make this…"

Will backs away from the door silently.

He dithers in the kitchen for a few moments, until he notices Tommy watching him. The boy, of course, feels everything that Will is feeling, but is unable to grasp nuance or contextualize it.

Will makes a conscious effort to still the emotions that are writhing inside of him like a ball of snakes.

He'd given Tommy some apples and a peeler so he could help with dessert, but now Will takes them from the boy's hands. "Go and tell your mom that supper is just about ready," Will says, and is relieved when Tommy runs to do so, his sneakered feet squeaking on the floorboards; they'll hear him coming.

"I won't come along with him anymore," Hannibal is saying. "I'm more than half the problem - I'm far more recognizable than Will is, and it's my face that Tommy is most likely to see if he tries to google Mason's death."

"Start immediately - as soon as we sit down for dinner - to refer to him by some other name, and I will follow suit. It won't take too long for Tommy to forget that anyone ever called Will 'Will.'" Hannibal leans forward, preparing to play his best card. "You said yourself that he's already thinking about Will as 'dad' inside his own head, so let the boy call him that from here on out, and that will help with the forgetting."

Margot listens silently with her hands folded in her lap. Hannibal can't tell if she is only being polite.

"You can find a plausible reason to explain why Will only visits rarely and why he's so anxious about interacting with others. Tell the boy that his father is mentally ill. Tell him that his father's partner is troubled and rarely leaves home, and that leaving me behind to travel alone takes too much out of the both us for him to do it often.

"This is, essentially, the truth, and the nature of that truth is such that even as an adult he will not find it unusual if everyone else is evasive about the details."

Margot opens her mouth to reply, but before she can say anything they hear Tommy running down the hall, and the screen door swings open.

"Supper's about ready," Tommy announces.

She rises, clearly eager for an excuse to cut the conversation short, and follows Tommy inside without a backward look at Hannibal.

He is slower to follow. Hannibal sits alone in the fading light for a time first, working to check his temper and bring his frustration to heel.

Chapter 9

The four of them are just finishing dessert when the light from a pair of headlights intrude upon them through the open kitchen window.

It is Cordell driving this time, in a different car, and they all watch through the window as he kills the lights and climbs out. He is bathed in shadow as he advances on the beach house.

For Will, seeing the surgeon again provokes the usual stab of disgust, underpinned by a fear that he refuses to consciously own up to, but all of this is multiplied manifold by Cordell's proximity to Margot.

When Mason was still alive, it was Cordell who for almost two decades kept Margot out of the hospital whenever Mason worked her over, stitching up her wounds and keeping the entire ugly business out of the line of sight of anyone who might have sought to intervene. Such is the nature of Cordell's expensive and highly specialized practice.

It is a source of tremendous guilt that Margot has needed to call upon Cordell twice now for Will's sake.

They all have their own ways of dealing with the unease and distaste that Cordell's presence provokes.

Margot withdraws, citing a desire to give them privacy, with the clear subtext of wanting to shield the boy from anything distressing. She and Tommy go into the guest room.

Hannibal does not leave, but as Cordell unpacks his bag on the counter, Hannibal begins to clear the table, bringing order to the space around him as a means of asserting control.

When Cordell advances on Will, though, Hannibal moves closer too. He waits and watches, standing behind Will and a little to the left, just inside of Will's field of vision. That, at least is a comfort.

Will has his ways, too, but he tries - at least, at first, to behave himself and be civil.

He begins by drawing blood. Will looks away as the viles fill; he is, by now, exhausted with seeing his own blood. Cordell packs a few of the vials away for lab testing and applies the rest to a set of test panels he brought with him.

While they are waiting for the results, Cordell does a through examination. He listens to Will's heart and his lungs, then takes his blood pressure and temperature. "High," he informs Will, and Will does not think that he is imagining the tone of delight in Cordell's voice when he delivers this news.

Will wonders if he is anticipating the additional money that will come his way if he's needed, or if it is personal; he has used Cordell when he needed him, and Cordell has been happy

enough to take his payment, but for years now the animosity between them has festered. That makes being at his mercy that much more difficult for Will.

“99.9 degrees,” Cordell adds, shaking the thermometer and putting it back in its case.

“That’s actually technically not a fever,” Will says, but he is feeling the first nip of anxiety. He’d considered this exam to be an unpleasant technicality - a good excuse to see Margot and the boy one last time, but otherwise unnecessary.

Now, though, he is worried.

He thinks, too, that Cordell can see that worry and is enjoying it.

Moving into the neurological tests, Cordell pokes and prods at Will. He measures the dilation of his pupils with an ophthalmoscope knocks at his joints with a reflex hammer, before having Will get up and move around in specific ways to assess his motor skills and balance.

Finally, Cordell says, “Take off the gloves,” in a tone that someone who is particularly bad with animals might use to command a dog.

Will remembers how close he came to melting down completely in front of this man, the vicious defensive panic that had filled him when Cordell approached him with the restraints, and the total lack of interest with which Cordell regarded his terror and his threats; if not for Hannibal, he would have done whatever he wanted with Will while he was too helpless to resist.

It’s the shame of those memories that drives Will to spiteful mockery now.

“No restraints?” Will inquiries, with extravagantly phony innocence. He strips off one glove and then the other. “You aren’t frightened that I might try to bite you this time around?”

Will slides his eyes towards Hannibal, and sees the edges of his mouth twitch upperwards, for just a second. There’s something like delight sparkling in his eyes, too, and that eggs Will on.

Turning his attention back to Cordell, Will sees that the other man did not expect Will to remember the way that he’d been treated, much less hold him to account for it now. Guilt is not part of Cordell’s emotional repertoire, but Will sees him weighing the risks, and then visibly deciding to double down on the approach he took last time.

Will can see himself being dismissed, and that adds an extra layer of spite to Will’s already large pile of reasons to dislike the man, and so when Cordell leans in to touch his hands Will lunges forward and snaps at the open air with his teeth, hardly an inch shy of the tip of Cordell’s nose.

Cordell jerks away clumsily and Will settles back into his chair, watching with pleasure the way Cordell’s frightened shock slides into outrage. Will can almost feel the amusement radiating off of Hannibal.

Will meets his gaze levelly, watching as Cordell backs further away and glares at him, and for a moment he sees real terror writhing behind his eyes. It’s deeply gratifying; the man is such

a cold fish, and well accustomed to treating wealthy monsters and their victims, and so shaking him feels like a real accomplishment.

“Oh, don’t worry so much,” Will says breezily. “I was just teasing you.”

“I am not going to examine your hands,” Cordell says, as though he is handing down a severe penalty from on high.

“That’s just fine,” says Will, who couldn’t be happier at the news. “They are just fine, and it isn’t as though you could really do anything about it if they weren’t, could you?”

The first part of that statement is a boastful lie, of course. His right hand is marred but essentially fully functional, but his left hand is another story; he’s lost grip strength in several of the fingers, and he can neither extend nor bend his ring finger, which curls in on itself loosely unless he uses his other hand to straighten it. But really there is no point in hashing all of this out with Cordell; it would take serious, highly specialized surgery for there to be even a chance of repairing the damage that he has done to himself, and Will knows that he will not see that in this lifetime.

He’ll think later that maybe that was his big mistake, the point where he went too far - not in scaring Cordell, but suggesting that his skills were not up to task.

Cordell turns around in disgust to study the blood panels on the counter. His back to Will, head bowed over one of the panels, Cordell says, “Your antibodies are still elevated,” and Will knows, as soon as the words cross Cordell’s lips that the man is lying - he is being played with, undermined, punished.

But just as soon as Will knows this, he begins to doubt that knowledge. Cordell is packing the panels away into the small medical waste bag in which he’d earlier put the used needle and empty blood vials, and Will is caught between ugly suspicion and a helpless dread that the suspicion itself is evidence that he is still ill.
Cordell is taking bottles out of his bag and lining them up on the counter. More pills - an endless fucking regiment of pills.

Will feels dizzy with fear. He feels desperately unbalance - confused, all over again, about his own perceptions of his body and mind.

Hannibal is close to him now, though Will did not see when he moved, and Will takes his offered hand and clutches it desperately, as though it might offer him balance.

“I thought I’d gotten better,” Will says, and hates the wounded helplessness of his own voice.

Hannibal doesn’t answer. He is watching Cordell with a sort of intense curiosity that Will knows carries dangerous potentialities.

Cordell spares Hannibal a look, and beneath his air of professional, detached indifference, Will thinks he sees a shade of uneasiness. “You shouldn’t have allowed him to travel,” he says, bustling past Hannibal towards the sink. “He should be on bed rest for at least another two weeks, maybe longer.”

Then he turns on the water, literally washing his hands of the business.

Cordell goes to the end of the hall and calls, “Ms. Verger.” Will feels his lip curl, baring his teeth in earnest this time, and Will does not have to look to know that a much more subtle version of the same expression rests on Hannibal’s face.

Margot comes down the hallway to join them in the kitchen, sans Tommy. “Yes?”

“I’ll be waiting in the car,” he says, busily packing up his bag.

Will watches Margot read the room. It is a talent of those who have survived abuse, and she is especially good at it. Will knows that she misses very little; Cordell’s affronted fear hidden behind phlegmatic indifference; Will’s own terrified uncertainty and his eagerness to be given an excuse to loose that fear upon Cordell so that, at least for a little while, he will not be the one to bear it; and whatever it is that is seething beneath Hannibal’s placid expression.

She says, “You can leave, Cordell. I’ll phone Taniya to come to get us when I’m ready.”

Will speaks up. “This is bullshit,” he says, finding his voice at last. “I’m not sick.”

There is something desperate thumping around in his chest. He is telling the truth - or at least, he thinks he is - but he is terrified of not being believed.

Cordell glances back at Will, and along the edges of his rubbery mouth he sees the slightest hint of a smirk.

Will would like to fly at him - would like tear those disgusting lips from the man’s disgusting face and make him eat them, and -

And Hannibal’s hand is on his shoulder, as much holding Will back as steadying him, but that’s perfectly fine because he sees that Cordell is scared again - that there is an awareness in his eyes that he has miscalculated something, has underestimated the danger that he has provoked.

It will only be later that Will realizes that Cordell was reacting not to him but to Hannibal. Now, Hannibal stands behind Will, and so Will does not know that Hannibal caught Cordell’s gloating little smile, nor does he see the expression that Hannibal is making in response.

The fear is enough to appease Will, at least for the moment, and he leans back into Hannibal’s touch and reaches up to lay his own hand on top of Hannibal’s.

As soon as Cordell is gone, Margot crosses the kitchen and puts her arms around Will, then she reaches out with one hand to draw Hannibal in, too. Hannibal allows himself to be pulled into the little huddle, and curls one arm around the small of Will’s back and lays another across Margot’s shoulders.

When Will starts to shake, though, Hannibal pulls them both away from Margot and then steps back to give Will more space. “He said I’m still sick,” Will tells Margot, his voice

shaky.

Will looks up at Hannibal, and there is a desperate pleading in his eyes. “Do you think he was lying?”

“Almost certainly,” Hannibal says, without hesitation. “But I don’t think we can take the chance of assuming that I’m right.”

Margot says carefully, “Cordell makes a sizable income on the basis of client recommendations. He’s risking quite a lot if he’s deliberately giving bad medical advice just to get under your skin.”

Will turns his head toward Margot. “You should get rid of him, you know,” he tells her, with an earnestness that is only slightly edged by panic; Will is finding his feet after the blow much more quickly than Hannibal might have expected from past experience. That pleases him immensely.

“He isn’t trustworthy,” Will continues. “He’s a spineless, money grubbing, amoral worm, and he knows too much about too many things. It’s dangerous.”

“You know I can’t do that.”

“Sure you can,” Will says. “You can afford a hitman, can’t you? Or, you know, I could -”

“No, Will.”

“Or Hannibal. I’m sure he’d be more than willing.”

Hannibal keeps his face carefully neutral, but he inclines his head slightly in agreement. In truth, there is nothing that he’d enjoy more than following Cordell out into the night and strangling the life out of him.

“Can you stop?” Margot says.

“I’m sorry, Margot - I’m just joking around,” Will says easily, almost distractedly. His voice is light, but he is staring intently at the bottles of pills on the counter. “I’m not taking those. He might have tampered with the pills.”

“No,” Hannibal agrees. “I’ll find you replacements.

“I suppose,” he continues, “that this is home for the next two weeks.

“He might be lying about everything else, Will, but it’s true that you look like you could use some rest and relaxation.” Hannibal has half a mind to suggest that Margot and Tommy stay a bit longer - maybe a few days - since he and Will aren’t going anywhere, but he recognizes this as far too lacking in subtlety.

“He’s right, Will,” Margot says. “It won’t hurt for you to take it easy for a little while, just to be on the safe side.”

Will sighs with resignation.

Chapter 10

When Will walks into the bathroom he sees a large insect laying on the floor.

Its on its back, and Will can see the bite mark where Mouser has punctured its unarmored belly, though the small cat is currently nowhere to be seen.

Will sighs and tears off a wad of toilet paper, meaning to pick the thing up and flush it, but when his shadow passes over it the bug begins to move. It turns its head in a lively way, seeming to look around the room - to look up at Will, it feels like. Its legs wiggle and its mandibles work, clicking together, and its peppy little antennas bounce as its head moves.

When Will reaches down for it the insect turns its head toward the movement. He knows, rationally, of course, that it is wrong to attribute curiosity to the motion, much less hopefulness or trust, and that he is only anthropomorphizing the poor dying thing, but Will can't help himself.

He stands up and calls down the hallway, "Hannibal, can you come here, please?"

Hannibal comes to the doorway. He looks at Will, then glances down at the insect, then turns his eyes back to Will, curious.

Will says, "Would you, um, get rid of that for me."

He watches Will, head cocked slightly to the side.

"I'm not afraid of it," Will tells him. "And I know it's going to die anyway. But it looked at me and I don't want to be the one to kill it."

Hannibal blinks. "Do you want me to put it outside?"

Will tries to make his voice sound less agitated. "I don't care what you do with it. I'm aware, Hannibal, that I'm just imagining that it wants something from me, but I can't help it, so please just do something with it."

"Are you hallucinating?"

Will feels more tired than annoyed. "No more than usual. And this doesn't have anything to do with that. Listen, can you just…"

Hannibal takes the toilet paper from Will and scoops the insect up from the floor. He carries in far away from the house, to a stand of scrubby bushes up near the edge of the beach, and leaves it there where it can die out of sight on its own time, if some larger predator does not find it first. He wonders if he ought to just crush it, but feels that Will would know if he did so, and might be unhappy about it.

The beach dogs seem to materialize out of nowhere, when Hannibal turns and heads back to the house. There are five of them. They hang back, too skittish to approach him, but follow at a distance.

“Your friends are here,” Hannibal tells Will, closing the screen door behind himself. “I think they expect an early dinner.”

“Oh,” Will says, a little distractedly, and then gives his head a slight shake to clear it. He gets up and goes to the cupboard in which the dog kibble is stored, and takes it down.

Hannibal does not follow Will outside, but he stands in the doorway and looks out through the screen door as Will fills the bowls that are lined up about ten yards away from the house. He’s careful with his left hand.

When he’s done, Will backs away from the bowls and then hunkers down a little distance away as the strays come forward cautiously. Hannibal watches Will watching the mongrel dogs. Will doesn’t try to touch them, and Hannibal doesn’t think they would let him if he attempted to do so, but they are not frightened of Will in the way that Hannibal frightens them.

It’s a chilly, overcast day, and from behind Hannibal can see Will curl his arms around himself for warmth.

Hannibal turns away from the door and settles down on the couch with his tablet, and a little while later Will come back inside and wedges himself in beside Hannibal. He hooks an arm around Hannibal’s neck to draw him closer and plants a kiss on his cheek. “Thanks for putting up with me.”
Hannibal is quiet, his puzzlement unvoiced. “Sorry about the bug thing. Sometimes something just looks at you with big eyes and you have to go, ‘dammit,” Will tells him. “I know it isn’t rational.”

“There’s no reason to apologize. Vulnerability rarely inspires you to violence. I enjoy that about you, Will.”

The words leave Will feeling exposed, for all their good intent. “You’re a sweet old thing, but you have tragically low standards.”

Hannibal doesn’t answer. Instead, he nuzzles against his ear and Will laughs and draws away.

When he speaks, though, he does so seriously. “Listen. I don’t want to be treated like I’m potentially crazy for the rest of forever.” When Hannibal remains carefully quiet, Will says, “Yeah. Yeah, I know - I am crazy. But I know what kind of crazy I am and, you know, absent my brain trying to burn itself up from the inside out, I know when I’m acting crazy. You don’t have to worry every time I do something a little weird.”

“Why do you think I’m worried?”

“Aren’t you?”

“If you were ever on the verge of getting sick again, I think we’ve nipped that in the bud.” It’s been nearly two weeks since Cordell informed them that Will was ill. He has been taking his prescriptions, though only after Will checked the dosages and possible drug interactions carefully to make sure they were safe, and Hannibal obtained replacements for the pills Cordell left. The antibody panels Will ordered online came a few days ago, and his results were nearly within the normal range. “You’ve been a bit manic, but that’s all.”

“I’m not manic,” says Will, who has spent the past ten days of enforced bedrest veering between long stretches of sleep and an obsessive focus on the well-being of not only their own pets but the local strays as well. “I’m *bored.* I’ve never been so bored in my damn life - Thank god we are going out tonight or I don’t know what I would do.”

Dinner and a movie; that is what they have agreed upon, and it will be Will’s first time away from the beach house since Cordell claimed that he was still sick.

“When we’re done here, I want to find a way to go back to work.”

“You’re used to being able to help people,” Hannibal observes.

“Well, yeah. I guess I kinda need it, you know, as much as the other thing.”

“Is that why you’ve been so focused on the dogs?”

“Hadn’t thought of it,” Will lies. He’s recognized from the first time he spotted one of the wandering mutts and offered it most of his own lunch that the strays could be a kind of stop-gap against a type of hunger that even Hannibal’s constant presence isn’t enough to sate; they are a means of easy confirmation that he is doing some good in the world - that he is capable of good, along with all the rest, and that others benefit from his presence. Will’s appetite for such validation is bottomless.

These things are nearly impossible to speak of, but he knows that he does not have to be direct - or even completely honest - for Hannibal to understand what he means. There’s more vulnerability in that than he would like, but it’s good, too.

“I guess you’re right, though,” Will goes on, doing his best. “They need me. I mean, anyway, they could use some help and I can give them that. I like the way being useful makes me feel.”

Hannibal snuggles in closer to him. His fingers comb through Will’s hair, neatening the shaggy lengths, and Will melts into the touch. Will can’t help feeling sloppy and disordered; he’s let his hair run wild, and has discarded his accustomed designer jeans and linen shirts for wrinkled castoffs that barely fit and only rarely match, and when he sees his reflection these days he hardly knows himself.

But that, of course, is the point. And Hannibal, at least, seems to like him no less this way, though his compulsion to put to order everything around him sometimes drives Hannibal to fiddle with Will’s hair and clothing, even when they are in public.

“I know we can’t keep those dogs,” Will continues. “We won’t be here much longer, anyway. And I know that I can’t go back into psychiatry - that’s too small and too interconnected a professional pool for me to be able to get away with it. But it wouldn’t be all that hard to get ahold of a fake counseling license, and there’s other stuff I could do, maybe.”

Hannibal hums, agreeably, his fingers still tracing the knap of Will’s neck, and Will can feel the vibration of Hannibal chest in his own body. Suddenly, the touching is too much - too good, too overwhelming, and despite everything, Will continues to believe, too undeserved - and when the distant lights of the approaching taxi come into view through the kitchen window Will takes the excuse to disengage and moves quickly to his feet.

They have a lovely night, but before the final credits roll, Will’s head is nodding against Hannibal’s shoulder.

Hannibal is confident that the encephalitis is gone, but Will still tires so easily. He knows that this is not unusual, and often there is something deeply appealing to Will’s soft weariness, but it nonetheless nettles him to concern.

Tonight, though, it serves his purposes.

Will leaning on his arm like a ragged jewel, Hannibal raises his free hand to hail a taxi. The eyes of passersby on them feel good to Hannibal, even when they are not entirely friendly. Will may no longer carry the polished air of warm, confident authority that he masked himself in when the two of them first met, but what resides beneath that carefully constructed shell is that much better - so raw and emotional and alive to the world in all its brilliant and bitter facets.

It doesn’t matter that these strangers can’t possibly know the value of the sallow, worn down man hanging on his arm; Hannibal knows, and too he knows his own value to be both validated and improved upon by Will’s mere proximity.

“You go on ahead without me,” Hannibal says, when the cab pulls up to the curb. “I’ve an errand to run, but I’ll be home an hour or so after you arrive.”

Will looks at him, his expression cunning. “Are you getting me a present?” he asks.

Hannibal doesn’t answer, but the edges of his lips and the lines around his eyes, nonetheless, give him away.

“You are!” Will accuses, his own face bright, the smile broad with anticipated pleasure. “Is it alive?”

He wonders if Will is asking if the gift is a new pet or someone for him to kill, but both enquiries are of course embedded in the question.

“You’ll see,” Hannibal tells him, and opens the cab door for Will.

Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will is only in the cab for a few minutes when he begins to feel lonesome and antsy.

He suspects that it isn't rational, but he wants out. Despite his exhaustion, he isn't ready to return to the little beach house. He wants to see more of the city, and he wants Hannibal. Will does not feel safe apart from him.

Despite that desire to be back together, it rankles a bit to have to check in, but Will knows that it's the smart thing, so he texts Hannibal to alert him to the change of plans. *I'm going to ride the bus around for a little while,* he writes. *Meet me at the Alvorada station when you're ready to head home, and we'll go back together.*

When Hannibal messages back his acceptance, Will instructs the taxi driver to pull over at the nearest bus stop. The man is annoyed, but Will gives him a nice tip, and hopes that makes up for the trouble.

Will people watches on the bus. It has been a long time since he has been able to just sit and watch strangers, and he studies the people covertly as they come and go, watching the women workers on their way to their night shift jobs in the factories or on cleaning crews, the drunken vacationing college co-eds and the sex workers and the homeless who have paid their coin to sit, unmolested, in the relative shelter of the moving vehicle. A small man boards, his hands deep in his pockets and his collar turned up, and from the particular nature of the evasive way he holds his eyes, Will knows that he is returning from an evening with a secret lover.

Not his usual meat, the class of people who ride the night bus; even the obnoxious foreign university students are too young for his taste.

Nonetheless, for fun he entertains the idea of following one of these strangers home, of slipping out from the shadows when his prey unlocks the front door, shoving him inside and following after and bolting the door behind them.

But he knows that he isn't strong enough to try such a stunt. And anyway, home invasions have never been Will's style - much better to with guile and warm sympathy convince the other to follow him willingly to his own doom. Such a gambit would be especially dangerous to try without scouting ahead - there's no telling who else might be waiting at home.

And Will promised Hannibal that they would do this together from now on.

When the four young men get on the bus, Will does not know that they had been tailing his cab since it left the theater, or the wrench that his leaving the taxi threw in their plans. He does not know that they'd intended to follow the cab in their own car until they were out of

the city, and then to pull ahead of it and block the road, to show the driver their guns and then their papers, and to take Will away with them in their own car.

Will does not know how he has disappointed them, how much these young soldiers of fortune looked forward to pulling such a daring stunt. Will almost shook them when he boarded the bus - they had needed to rush ahead three stops along the bus route and park their car illegally to intercept him in time - and the stress and annoyance of nearly losing their target has further soured their moods, but Will doesn't know that either, any more than he knows a fifth man is at this moment trailing Hannibal at a distance, keeping him in sight but waiting until his friends have finished up with Will and joined him to move in on Hannibal.

Will looks at them, briefly, when they board the bus and sit down in the row of seats across from him, but at first Will gives them little regard. They look very much like the sort of men that Will often favors as targets - large, powerfully built men who radiated a particularly obnoxious flavor of arrogance. Three of them are white, two blondes and a brunette with his hair clipped so brutally close to his scalp that he looks nearly bald, none of them under six feet tall or a hundred and eighty pounds. The fourth is slightly less gigantic, and might be Latino, and Will is not sure at first if he is really with the others.

Their sudden appearance, when he has just reminded himself firmly that he is not hunting, comes with the same frustration he might have felt had he spotted a trophy buck in the woods while he was without a gun.

He resolves to ignore them, to focus his attention on more interesting - and less tempting - individuals, but after a while they start to make him uneasy. Will can not say, really, if they are paying too much or not enough attention to him than would be normal for strangers facing each other on the bus, but there is something about them that makes his hand itch towards the knife in his pocket.

I'm being paranoid, Will tells himself. *I'm not going to let my fucking paranoia ruin today, not when it's been such a nice day.*

But he can't shake the feeling, the sense of undefined but looming danger. He feels, Will realizes, the way he used to feel when his father was at home but in a different room.

At the next stop, Will rises to get off the bus, and behind him he hears the men stand as well.

There is a cab a little ways down the street, and Will hurries towards it, intending to get in and get gone, but it pulls away before he's cleared half the distance. There are footsteps behind him, drawing closer, but Will doesn't dare to turn around and look.

He keeps walking, quickly - just short of running now - and his eyes scan the street desperately for another cab. There aren't any, and he keeps going forward for lack of any other means of retreat.

Stay out of the shadows and they won't dare touch you, Will tells himself. There aren't many people on the street, but there's enough that he believes they won't want to attract too much attention.

He is thinking of them like they are criminals or killers, and he only realizes later how foolish that is; witnesses are not a concern to licensed bounty hunters.

Now, though, he does not know what they are. Even when he feels a hand close over his shoulder and the butt of the handgun press into the small of his back as the other men circle around in front of him, Will thinks, *This is a mugging. They just want money - give it to them and maybe they won't rough you up.*

His hand goes not for the knife in his right side pocket but for the wallet in his left rear pocket, and it is only when a set of hands separate from the one holding onto him and the gun catches his forearm and snaps one end of a set of handcuffs around his wrist that Will realizes that he's wrong.

When that happens, Will goes completely wild.

When Hannibal comes out of the jeweller's, the three little boxes nestled safely in his pocket, he becomes aware almost at once that he is being followed.

Like Will, he assumes that the stranger intends to rob him, but there is only one man on Hannibal's tail, and Hannibal is in fine form, almost entirely recovered from his time spent in prison, and he has no intention of turning over to a common thief the exquisite little ornaments that he has had commissioned for Will. And he wants to make sure this stranger is *only* an aspiring mugger.

He leads the man on a quiet but lengthy chase through the side streets. His pursuer is not especially good at the task he has undertaken, and Hannibal is amused by the need to make it simple for him - to avoid getting too far ahead or making too cunning a dodge.

When Hannibal comes to a quiet alley, his tail still one turn behind him, he ducks behind a dumpster, his nose wrinkling grimly at the scent.

Hannibal watches the corner from the shadows behind the dumpster. Some time goes by before his pursuer appears again, long enough for Hannibal to worry that he might have shaken him by mistake, but then he comes into sight.

The man has his cell phone out, and he does not even look up in Hannibal's direction when he passes the dumpster.

Hannibal blinks, astonished, and then stalks up behind the man on silent feet and strikes him hard across the back of the head. The stranger has three inches and at least forty pounds on Hannibal, but he goes down easily, and Hannibal follows him to the ground and pounds his head against the cobblestones to make sure he stays that way for a while.

The phone dropped from the stranger's hands when Hannibal hit him, sliding across the dirty cobblestones. Hannibal reaches now to retrieve it, curious as to what distracted his pursuer.

The screen is open on a group text message, and there is an image attached. In the picture, Will is bound with his hands behind his back on a metal folding chair, a blindfold over his eyes. He is slumped forward in the chair, apparently unconscious. There is blood on Will's mouth.

The anger in Hannibal is like a raging beast. He works hard to beat it down so he can think clearly. Three large men, much like one Hannibal took the phone from, stand around Will, grinning like big game hunters with their trophy. Hannibal supposes there must be one more taking the picture.

The message below the photo says, *Got Graham. The little fucker BITES. Where you at?*

Hannibal thinks for a moment. On the ground below him, the man groans and tries to turn over.

Lost track of Lecter, he texts back. *Location?*

SHIT, dude, comes the reply. And then, just a moment later, GPS facilitated address.

There are teeth in Hannibal's smile.

He slips the phone into his pocket and turns his attention to its owner.

Chapter End Notes

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Chapter 12

When Graham went absolutely crazy, Emilio somehow found himself in the center of it.

Graham got his hands on Emilio and then the man was clawing at him like an animal, drawing blood from Emilio's arms and neck and face. Even while it was happening, Emilio could hardly understand it; the guy wasn't exactly tiny, but they were all much bigger than he was, and when they were chasing him he seemed so frail and frightened that he *felt* small.

It had felt like they were running down a skittish, wounded rabbit, but the instant Ryan slapped the first cuff around his wrist Graham transformed into a rabid dog.

Then he jerked his head forward and *bit* Emilio.

It took all three of the others using their fists and feet to get Graham to let go, and still he hadn't gone easily. He'd take a patch of Emilio's skin with him, and it *hurt*, and Emilio was damned if he didn't think the guy had *swallowed* it.

Emilio looked down at his bleeding shoulder, the teeth marks plain beneath the torn skin and welling blood, and he'd been struck by the sudden certainty that Graham had been aiming for his neck - that he would have torn out his throat with his goddamn teeth if he'd had a chance.

Vertigo struck Emilio then, raw shocked terror at what almost might have happened.

"He bit me!" Emilio said, but none of the others responded. They were busy working over Graham - trying to get him pinned down long enough to get the other cuff around his other wrist, but he bucked and twisted, lashing out with nails and fists and teeth.

All of this Graham did in almost complete silence, his labored breathing the only sound, his lips skinned back in a fixed snarl.

When he finally went down and stayed down, Kevin backed away, looking down at Graham in a sort of horrified wonder, as though he were a venomous snake impaled on the end of a spear. There was an engagement ring with a big stone on it - kind of girlish, actually - on the ring finger of Graham's right hand, and it had torn a gash just above Kevin's eyebrow. The cut was bleeding heavily, and Kevin had to keep reaching up to wipe away the blood so it wouldn't get in his eye.

"Wow," Kevin said, when he saw Emilio looking at him. "Whoa. That was…" He laughed nervously and nudged Graham's ankle with the toe of his combat boot.

The sense of unease grows in Emilio's chest; he's regretted letting Ryan talk him into this little "vacation" many times over the last week, but even with Graham in chains it more than ever feels like a bad decision.

"He bit me," Emilio says again, directly to Kevin but to the others as well. He feels miffed that this has yet to be acknowledged; No one told him, when he signed up for this, that he

might get bitten.

“Don’t worry about it, Melo,” Kevin tells him. “Chill out - that’s going to be one badass battle scar.”

A small crowd has gathered around them, keeping at a suspicious distance, their faces shocked and disapproving, even disgusted, and Emilio feels his sense of frustrated shame on his skin, an acutely uncomfortable physical sensation.

Ryan moved to pacify them, a welcoming smile on his face. He had print copies of Graham’s wanted poster and arrest warrant, and he waved them at the crowd, holding them high so everyone could see.

Behind Emilio, Scott says, “We need to hurry up. If they called the police we’re liable to get fucked out of two thirds of our pay.”

Emilio’s thoughts feel shocked into sluggishness. “What do you mean?”

“If they find out we have Graham, they’re going to start looking for Lecter. We’re boned if we don’t get him first.”

“It’ll be fine,” Kevin says. “Blake’s on the trail.”

And Blake, Emilio thinks privately, is the only one dumber than Kevin, but now Ryan is waving him over.

“Translate,” he whispers to Emilio.

Emilio makes a stumbling attempt at Portuguese, the bulk of which he has picked up online over the last seventy-two hours. He thinks that he is at least semi-intelligible to some of the onlookers, which is an improvement.

Better yet, his efforts inspire someone with Spanish to step forward to bridge the distance. That is more upon Emilio’s speed, and he translates Ryan’s words into Spanish and the stranger turns them into Portuguese.

While he and Ryan were busy with the onlookers, Kevin and Scott loaded Graham into the rental van.

Now, they are at the warehouse.

The others have taken their picture, and now they’re getting ready to go out again. The plan is to leave Emilio behind to keep an eye on Graham while the others go out to help Blake collar Lecter. They are talking with each other, over by the parked van, but Emilio isn’t paying a lot of attention.

He is sort of worried about Graham.

It’s been nearly twenty minutes and the guy hasn’t woken up yet. Even when Emilio leans over to poke him he doesn’t move.

He thinks they might have hit Graham too hard. Scott, Emilio is learning, has an ugly temper, and once the guy was down he went to town on him especially hard.

Unlike his companion, Emilio isn't a licensed bounty hunter, but he knows how to use google. And google says that if Graham dies they could be charged with murder. Emilio doesn't want to be mixed up in anything like that.

By the van, voices are beginning to rise.

"... so fucking stupid," Scott is saying, and Emilio turns his head toward the sound.

"It's not my fault," Kevin says, just as loudly. Petulant as well as angry.

Scott's hand snakes out and knocks Kevin, open-handed, against the back of the head. Emilio thinks that the blow probably wasn't especially painful, but then it wasn't meant to be. It was meant to demean, and even from the distance Emilio can see Kevin's face reddening, so clearly it did its job.

"Sure," Scott spits at him. "It's not your fault that you're dumb as hell."

Kevin shoves him. Scott's hands come up, and Emilio thinks that the next blow will be in vicious earnest.

Ryan gets between the two of them.

Emilio can't really make out what they are saying, but Ryan takes out his cellphone and holds it to his ear. He stands silently, for what seems like a long time to Emilio, before shaking his head and putting the phone back in his pocket.

There is a brief conference between the three of them, heated tones now tinged with a certain degree of panic, and Ryan is frowning when he turns and comes toward Emilio.

"What's going on?" Emilio asks, when Ryan crouches and begins to untie Graham's legs from the folding chair.

"Probably nothing," Ryan says easily, but by now Emilio has been bullshitted by him enough times that he doesn't really believe that. "Blake's not answering his phone, so we're just like… going to move somewhere more secure."

"Is he okay?"

"Sure," Ryan tells him. "Probably, you know?

"Hold his legs - don't let him slide off the chair," he continues, and unfastens the handcuffs. He unbinds Graham from the back of the chair and then cuffs his hands behind his back again. "Okay. Lift."

They carry Graham back to the van. Kevin and Scott are already inside. Emilio goes in ahead of Graham, the both of them on the floor, and Ryan closes the door then circles around the van to climb in behind the driver's seat.

They are not out on the road for very long before it becomes obvious that not even Ryan really knows where they are going. Every couple of minutes Ryan picks up his cell phone again calls Blake, but no one answers.

When Graham finally wakes up it happens all of a sudden. His body jerks, trying to straighten, and when the bindings don't give away he bucks violently against them, trying with a mad desperation to get free.

It's hard to watch, and Emilio doesn't want to be close to it. He gets up off the floor of the van and joins Kevin on the row of seats in the back, though he stays as far away from Kevin as he can, too.

Balling his fists in his lap, Emilio sits still and tries to pretend he's somewhere else - *someone* else, someone smart enough to have known better than to get involved in all of this.

Graham is blindfolded and gagged, but the gag would only muffle screams, were Graham to scream. He doesn't though, for all his obvious fear, and that's kind of surprising. Emilio thinks that if he were in Graham's shoes he wouldn't be able to stop screaming.

Eventually, though, Graham has to stop struggling. He lays still on the floor of the van, rigid with terror, hyperventilating into his gag.

Anxiety is swelling the inside of Emilio's own throat. "Do you think he can breathe okay?"

"Sure he can," Kevin says, but Emilio thinks he sounds a little nervous, too. "Dude's just showing off."

Emilio gets up from his seat and, moving carefully with the swaying of the van, gets down on his knees next to Graham's head.

The guy doesn't seem very scary right now, despite the ache in Emilio's wounded shoulder. The trembling is visible, but Emilio doesn't fully realize how intense it is until he touches Graham.

"If you yell, I'll put the gag back on," he cautions Graham, as he lifts it away from his mouth.

Blindly, Graham's head darts forward, teeth seeking anything they can close upon. Emilio lunges backwards in a sudden terror of those clicking teeth, and he hears the others laughing at him - at him and Graham both, maybe.

The shame doesn't replace Emilio's fear; they mix together instead, and the resulting product is a violent rage.

So he hits Graham, as hard as he can, across the face. Emilio wants some sort of recognition - a plea, a cry, even a grunt, just some sign that he's gotten even, but Graham gives him nothing, and Emilio draws his fist back to hit him again.

Scott is still laughing, but everyone else has stopped.

Kevin is behind him. He puts one hand on Emilio's shoulder and with the other catches his wrist. "Dude, don't let him get under your skin," he tells Emilio, and is almost gentle in how he leads Emilio back to his seat.

It's a different kind of shame that's roiling in Emilio's stomach now; never, in his entire life, has he before hit another person like that, let alone someone who couldn't hit back.

Graham rolls as far over onto his side as his binds will allow, and spits blood onto the van's floor.

Chapter 13

The fool is stirring at Hannibal's feet, and Hannibal drags him up by the collar of his jacket and pins him against the brick wall. Hannibal twists at his ear, viciously, so hard that he feels the cartilage and skin begin to rip away, and the man becomes fully conscious very quickly, with a cry that Hannibal muffles with a hand over his mouth.

The bounty hunter wants to fight, Hannibal can see, and the dull boy's desperation to do so is underpinned by a sense that things have gone wrong in a way that they never should have in the proper order of things. Hannibal doubts that any of his targets have resisted before in any meaningful way, let alone gotten the upper hand. Parole violators and other beaten down, largely harmless creatures are probably more his speed; men who put their hands up and keep them that way when you show them a gun.

Hannibal shows him his knife now, and the bounty hunter goes rigid with fear. Hannibal's hand over his mouth pins the bounty hunter's head to the wall, but his wide eyes track the blade for as long as he can as Hannibal lowers it to press the tip against his chest. He pushes hard enough to poke through his clothing and break the skin, so the man will understand perfectly well where it is, and not forget.

The scent of fresh blood blooms in the air and Hannibal allows himself just a moment to savor it. He understands better now, what Will means when he speaks of finding joy in hurting those who believe themselves to be invulnerable. Mason had thought himself shielded by his wealth and privilege, but it is something else entirely - something even better - to have this taken down this prime American meathead so easily, and to have him at his mercy now.

But Hannibal does not tarry with it. He has questions, only a few, and the bounty hunter answers them without hesitation, eager to be useful, assuming - or convincing himself, at least - that if he is helpful the threat of the knife will be withdrawn and he will be allowed to go.

Instead, when he's heard all he needs to know, Hannibal covers the bounty hunter's mouth again and with his other hand presses the blade between his ribs and into his heart.

The man tries to grab onto Hannibal as his legs give out beneath him, a desperate clutching for whatever he can reach in the face of shocking pain. Hannibal pushes him away, disgusted, and he slips and falls on his ass in the filthy slime of the alley cobblestones.

He looks up at Hannibal, his fists pressed over his heaving chest at the place from which the blood is flowing out, and inside his gaping mouth Hannibal can see blood bubbling. Hannibal takes the bounty hunter's phone from his own pocket and snaps a quick photo of the man.

The fool is still unable or unwilling to comprehend just what has happened here, and it would be good to crouch down next to him and watch his face to see the understanding begin to dawn in it - if understanding ever came at all - as death closed over him, but there are far more important things to do.

The bounty hunter's eyes follow him when Hannibal pushes the dumpster a bit further from the wall, but unsteadily. He's still breathing and his eyes are still trying to get a lock on Hannibal when Hannibal drags him behind the dumpster.

Hannibal tries to keep from getting too much blood on his clothing.

He leaves the dying man behind and sets out towards the address on the phone.

Behind his closed eyelids, Will goes over the events that brought him here in his head.

He remembers getting off the bus, being followed.

The beating.

His head aches. The van sways beneath him, jarring his body with each bump.

There is fresh blood in his mouth, and unfortunately it is all his own.

When he opens his eyes the world is no less dark than when they are closed, so he opts for the latter. It gives him a vague illusion of being in control of at least something.

And he thinks, curiosity not cutting through but floating atop of the alkaline-flavored terror, *This is what it's like to be snatched up and taken.*

But it isn't as bad as that, really; they don't mean to kill him, he's quite sure. Will knows that he is not only of no worth to them dead, but that they might catch murder charges if he dies in their custody.

That, at least, puts the big sons of bitches at a disadvantage.

He forces himself to think around the pounding of his head.

They don't really know what he is capable of doing, no more than the rest of the world does, save Hannibal and to a lesser extent Margot. They know, at most, that he arranged Hannibal's escape from the BSHCI and that three people died in the process, at least one by Will's hands. Almost certainly, they are also aware that Hannibal was jailed for a single particularly ugly torture murder.

But that is all that they know. That ignorance is another point in his favor, if he uses it right.

Will supposes that he will have shocked them with how he fought, the biting and the attempts at biting, and though he knows in retrospect that it was probably a mistake it is not in him to regret it, beyond wishing that he'd been able to give back more of what he'd gotten.

You'll be calmer now, he tells himself. *You won't let them know that you mean to kill them.*

Will forces himself to think through his situation.

Hannibal must still be free.

If he wasn't the bounty hunters would have turned them both over to the police by now, Will reasons. The price on Hannibal's head is twice that which has been offered for Will. Will thinks that they must just be planning on holding onto him until they nab Hannibal.

Will doubts that will be as simple as they think.

Hannibal will, he knows, be looking for him. Hannibal will rescue him if he can.

Will turns his attention to what he needs to do to facilitate that.

Who do I need to be?

Quarrelsome but aggressive only in a specific, non-physically threatening way, he decides. The wealthy southern gentleman who is used to getting what he wants when he wants it, and always with courtesy.

It is a familiar mask to slip into, and there's some small measure of comfort in that, too.

It's not enough to battle back the terror, but it allows him to carry on despite the fear.

When the van comes to a stop, Will lifts his head slowly, trying to give the impression that he is just now regaining consciousness.

"Hello?" he says. Simple, to make the quavering in his voice sound authentic. "Somebody, please? Hello?"

Will hears them shifting their weight around in the van as they turn to look at him.

Anxious fingers flutter around his head, lifting the blindfold in little cautious jerks. Will sits on the desire to lash out with his teeth.

When he gets another good look at the four of them, Will is disgusted with himself. He's pissed, too; he cannot believe that he left himself get kidnapped by a bunch of frat boys playing at being white-trash commandos.

At least he has marked them some; one of the blondes has a nasty gash above his eye, and the brunette is working on a hell of a shiner. The odd duck of the group, the one he got his teeth into, has put a bandage on his wounded shoulder, but it is already bleeding through the bandages to stain the fabric of his shirt.

"What is the meaning of this?" Will demands, as though he doesn't know. The outrage comes easily, too.

"Will Graham," says the blonde that Will didn't manage to hurt, "you are a fugitive wanted in association with the murders of Emmett Waters, Matthew Brown, and Richard Snyder." Will recognizes one of the names as belonging to the ambulance driver he shot. Matthew killed Waters, actually, but Will doesn't argue the point. "The law permits us to apprehend you pending transfer to the rightful authorities."

Will debates the merits of pretending that he is not who they think he is, but then he dismisses that as a losing gambit.

He goes in swinging, but he bleeds a slight whine into his entitled indignation.

“You have a legal right to detain me - not to beat the hell out of me, and not to torture me emotionally and physically like ya’all’ve been doing. This is assault.”

“You resisted,” the blonde says. Will thinks he must be their leader.

Will pretends that he didn’t hear him. “I definitely had a concussion - maybe a brain injury, too. I am going to sue the shit out of all of you.”

That puts the other man on the back foot, as Will hoped it would. “You won’t win,” he says.

“Maybe not, but twelve thousand a piece - before travel expenses - isn’t going to last long when I tie your asses up in court for the next five years.”

Will has divided the fifty thousand dollar price on his head as though there are only four of them, but he suspects there’s at least one more member to this merry band.

This is confirmed when the one with the cut eyebrow says boastfully, “It’s going to be 30k each when we bag Lecter.”

“Is that all?” Will scoffs. “I can make it a hundred thousand for each of you, right now. Give me a phone and your routing numbers and the money will be in your accounts ten minutes from now, and all you have to do is back off and leave us be.”

And that will just about clean him out, but Will doesn’t think about that now.

He sees them considering.

“I can pay,” he repeats. “I can make it more if you let me talk to someone who can get me some cash. Half a million each, how about that?”

Margot will pay that much and more for Hannibal and himself without so much as a blink, Will knows, but it shames him to offer her money.

It is, nonetheless, essentially a sincere offer.

He’ll kill them if he can - his pride is even now demanding it, and he knows what a blow his self-conception will take if he lets people who treated him the way he has been treated get away with it - but that’s not the important thing.

The important thing is making sure Hannibal is okay - getting back to Hannibal and getting gone.

They are considering it, Will can tell, when all four cell phones chim at once.

And just like that, Hannibal changes the rules of the game.

Chapter 14

Will and his captors are gone from the warehouse by the time Hannibal jimmies open the fire exit.

He walks through the rows of shelves, knowing that there is no point in exercising stealth.

Near the loading bay he finds the chair to which Will was tied in the photo that the others texted to Blake's phone. It's laying on its side, small pools of drying blood beside it.

Muddy tire tracks mar the otherwise clean concrete floor a little way off, by a garage door. They come from a large vehicle, most likely a van, but that is all the information he can glean from the tracks; tire print analysis is not an area in which he is trained.

He can smell Will - fear sweat and blood, the scents still lingering in the air.

It's maddening to know that he has missed intercepting Will by so small a margin, and there is a cold and hateful thing inside of him, a desire to destroy the ones who have taken Will away that is unrivaled in its purity and intensity.

Hannibal takes the stolen cellphone out of his pocket.

He opens the group text again, and attaches the picture that he took of Blake as he lay dying.

The message that Hannibal composes is succinct, straightforward in both its demands and promises.

It's only after he hits the send icon that Hannibal begins to consider that doing so might have been impulsive.

It's created complications, Hannibal sending that photo, but it's not all bad.

Will can be scary now. He's free to be the person who he is only with Hannibal and people who he has already decided to kill.

He lays on his side in the back of the van, listening through the open side door as his three of his captors spin in place outside, panicking about what to do next. Emilio has not left his spot in the row of seats behind Will. He radiates unhappiness; even his breathing sounds miserable.

It's all nearly enough to *almost* make Will feel bad for them.

They aren't all that tough, and they aren't badasses, though obviously they'd thought of themselves as such - or, at least all of them except Emilio had.

They've gotten in so far over their heads, and Will sees that they are only now beginning to realize as much, but it is too late now to back down or get out.

His arms are handcuffed behind his back, and they've tied his ankles together with rope. The knots on the latter are good, and he doubts he'll be able to undo them without his hands. His arms feel entirely numb from the shoulders down, and he is not looking forward to the pain that is bound to follow when he gets free and the blood comes flowing back into them.

Wriggling, leaning his shoulder against the back of the front passenger seat, Will gets semi-upright and then onto his knees. Now he can watch them while they argue, and Will does so, attaching names to voices and faces.

He's thinking quickly, working on understanding them. If he can get a sense of their personalities and weaknesses, and of the faultlines that exist between them, all of that might be exploited to his benefit.

They're in some kind of factory, and Will has a suspicion that this merry band of idiots may have broke in. The prospect of a security guard coming around and catching them here is not a happy one; his captors might catch a case if that happened, but he himself is certain to be formally arrested if that happens.

"Maybe he's still alive," Kevin is saying. There's scoffing, sighs, a sad shaking of heads. "You don't know!"

Over his shoulder, Emilio mutters something that Will can't quite make out.

"Oh, he's dead," Will says, conversationally. "Blake, was it? Yes, well - he's dead, not a doubt."

"You haven't even seen the picture," Kevin tells him. Will supposes the disdainful way he curls his lip is meant to be intimidating, but to Will it looks childish and weak, and he marks the man as spineless as well as dim.

"True," Will agrees, "though I'd *love* to."

Of course, no one offers him a phone, and Will goes on. "Keeping a hostage would have slowed *him* down. It would have distracted from *his* primary goal."

Will has decided that he will refrain from using Hannibal's name, as doing so humanizes him. He wants them to think of Hannibal as some cold, inhuman killing machine, like a terminator, a monster that will stop at nothing to retrieve Will.

That, Will judges, is likely to get under their skins very quickly.

"We could have traded!" Kevin says. There is a desperation in his disbelief that things have gone this far. This had been a game to him, Will understands; no one was supposed to get seriously hurt, and if someone did it wasn't supposed to be his friend.

"Would you have?" Will pretends to wonder. "Well, who can say. Maybe you would have let me go in exchange for poor Blake, but maybe you would have decided to be clever and tried

to snatch him up, too."

Will can see in Kevin's eyes embarrassment at being read so easily and called out for it, and so he knows that he is right. He cuts his eyes away from Will, and turns to look at Ryan, apparently for guidance.

It's Scott who speaks. "Let's just turn Graham in and get the fifty thou. We can worry about Blake after that."

"What about Lecter?" Kevin demands.

"Let the police worry about Lecter."

"No," Ryan says, and Will sees that he at least has guts, if little by way of brains. "We're not going to let the police have Lecter - at least not right away. We are going to catch him, and we are going to stomp the shit out of him for Blake, and we are going to get paid."

"You'd better catch him," Will advises them. "The police won't, and if he loses me on your account he'll come for you, and he'll take you apart one piece at a time."

Kevin tries to relocate his sense of bravado. Will wonders about the picture that must still be painted behind his eyes; What, exactly, did Hannibal do to this Blake?

He looks down at Will and says, "He'd have to find us first."

Obviously, Kevin means to mock him, but he can't quite crush the edge of uneasiness in his voice.

Despite his position Will feels triumphant, but he keeps his voice mildly curious. "Did poor Blake have facebook on his phone?" Will wonders outloud. "I can see from your faces that he did. So *he'll* know your full names now, and *he'll* know the city you live in and where you work or go to school or hang out on the weekends, and *he* will know the names and faces of your loved ones as well.

They are all paying attention to him now, staring down with sudden dawning horror. And it's good, that fear, even if it's more for Hannibal than Will. There is a vicious pleasure in it despite the pain in his beaten body and the terror provoked by the restraints, because for the first time in a long time Will feels genuinely frightening, and it is *good*, and he *likes* it. He *wants* to kill them, and more than that he wants them to *know* that death is coming, and the fear that he sees in their eyes is *so good*.
Ryan tries to rally himself and take back control. He slides the van door closed in Will's face and leads the others away.

Just before they move out of earshot, Will hears Ryan tell the others, "He's trying to shake you up. Lecter is just an old man. We can..."

That's all Will can make out, but it's enough to bring a grin into being.

He supposes that if they've only looked at the pictures and news clips from the trial it comes as no surprise that they might have reached the conclusion that the skeletal man in chains

would be no great threat to them. Hannibal at no point during his incarceration looked defeated or weak, but Will doubts that any of them are canny enough to realize as much.

Will lets himself flop back over onto his side and goes to work on Emilio.

"Just us, huh?" Graham asks Emilio, from down on the floor. "Odd ones out."
Emilio turns his head to look out the tinted window at absolutely nothing but blackness.

"So do you think they forgot that you were still in here, or what?" Graham asks. It's a mean question, but he doesn't sound mean when he says it; he sounds almost like really does feel bad for Emilio.

"Leave me alone, man."

He'd like to get up and let himself out of the van, but he'd have to step over Graham to do it, and he's worried the guy might try to bite his ankle, or maybe trip him. Instead, Emilio pretends like he was left here on purpose to keep guard.

"Four on one is cheap fighting," Graham says, and Emilio, who has no conception of how talented Will is at exploiting every angle of unfair advantage, feels ashamed of himself.

He wonders if Graham knows he's the one who sucker punched him earlier. The uncertainty makes him anxious.

"Melo," Graham says. "That's what they call you, right?"

Emilio ignores him, and Graham says again, "Melo," as though it has a funny taste.

"Melo?" he repeats, a question this time. "Melo, Melo."

"What."

"Is that your real name? Melo doesn't sound like a real name to me."

The question grates on Emilio, because Ryan and his friends never asked if he minded if they cropped down his name, nor was he consulted as to whether or not he appreciated the specific nickname.

What he says, though, is "I'm not giving you my real name. I'm not stupid, you know."

And Emilio, at least, is not facebook friends with Blake, but he doesn't tell Graham that, either. He doesn't really believe, even with the photo of Blake gagging on his own blood, that things will get so out of hand that Lecter will someday come looking for their friends and families, but he sees no point in taking the risk; he has a little sister to think about, after all.

Graham does not seem offended. "Why are involved in this mess?" he presses, and his tone is bizarrely gentle. Emilio has to remind himself that the guy took a bite out of him not very long ago. "You strike me as better than the crowd you're running with."

“Man, I’ve got school loans. And you don’t get to try and guilt me - you killed those people.”

“‘Those people,’” Graham repeats, and now there is something sly about his expression, though his voice is entirely congenial. “You’ll have to be more specific than that, I’m afraid. I’ve killed lots of people.”

Emilio tries to keep his cool.

He lasts for perhaps fifteen seconds.

Then he climbs over the row of seats and goes out the back hatch.

He tries to do this with at least some measure of dignity, but he feels Graham’s eyes on him as he goes, and though he does not laugh out loud at Emilio he imagines that Graham is laughing on the inside.

Chapter 15

Will would love to go another round with these dipshit wannabe cowboys - thinks that if he had another half an hour or so to pick at them he might be able to stampede the lot of them, or at least turn them thoroughly against each other - but apparently Ryan has decided enough is enough.

When Scott reaches in and catches Will by two fists full of hair to yank him halfway out of the van and then restain his head while Ryan puts the gag back into place, Will tells himself not to fight it - that he will seem more uncanny and frightening if he can make himself appear unflappable, and that it is in his best interest not to encourage them to injure him further.

But it has never been in his nature to take a beating without lashing out in return, though when he was a boy this cost him considerably more bruises and a couple of broken bones that might otherwise have been avoided, and it is quite beyond him to start now.

The only one who has ever struck or manhandled Will without immediately incurring the greatest degree of retribution that he was capable of is Hannibal, and Will allowed that beating as a kind of apology - an acknowledgement that he had fucked everything up and was therefore ceding control over what happened next.

It is nearly impossible for him to turn over control to these assholes, and so though he knows that it is not in his best interests, Will gives several violent jerks of his head before he can stop himself, trying to break free of Scott's hold or else headbutt him with the back of his skull.

All it earns him is an aching neck and a new layer to the wretched pain in his head. When Scott finally lets go he brushes clumps of Will's hair from his hands. Will can feel the prickle of blood against his scalp.

When they lift him and carry him back into what seems to be the employee break room, Will tries to go away in his head, the same way he did in basement when Hannibal fell on him and when the pressures of Hannibal's arrest became too much to cope with.

It would be good now to go wandering in the woods, or better yet to speak with Hannibal's shade - to seek comfort in his imagination, and to plan.

The problem, as it stands now, is that Hannibal has no means of knowing where he is, and if Will cannot free himself by himself then the first thing is to find a way to communicate his location to Hannibal.

Bouncing ideas off the Hannibal who lives inside of his head might be a productive thought exercise, but it's harder for Will to pretend that he is somewhere else while their hands are touching him. Will thinks he would rather Hannibal beat him again than to have to stomach having his body touched and manipulated against his will as it is being now, even if Ryan at least is not especially rough as he undoes the cuffs to lash Will's arms to the arms of a heavy, cushioned chair. The pain as circulation returns to his arms is just as bad as he anticipated.

Will tries to get a kick in when Ryan kneels to temporarily unbind Will's legs, but he dodges and from behind Will Scott knocks him upside the head hard enough to leave him seeing stars.

In anticipation of another blow, Will lowers his head. He balls his hands into fists and bears his teeth behind the gag, but probably they take it was a sign of submission, because he hears Scott chuckle.

Hannibal is at a loss as to what to do next.

Furious, stymied anger burns cold inside of him, demanding that he do something, but without some idea of where they might have taken Will there's nothing to do.

He combs through Blake's phone, looking for some clue as to where they might be, but what he finds alerts him instead to the fact that it is not only himself and Will who might be in danger.

Hannibal calls Margot, explaining quickly exactly what he knows and how much he has guessed.

Together, they make a plan.

Will is alone for a little while, and he takes that opportunity to work at the rope that binds his wrists and ankles to the chair.

It's no good. He struggles as hard as he can, but the knots are well tied - he couldn't have done better himself - and nothing he does even begins to loosen them.

When a shadow darkens the doorway, Will goes still.

It's only Melo.

He comes into the breakroom, every bit of his body language reluctant, and sits down at the table across from Will.

Will pants into the gag, exaggerating the challenge of breathing through it, and watches Melo. When Melo meets his eyes, Will makes his own large and pleading. He tries to send out the kind of desperation that evokes pity, as much as he despises being the object of that emotion, and attempts with obvious helplessness to rub the side of his face against his shoulder and the back of the chair to remove the gag.

Will can tell that Melo is almost certain that Will is putting on a show, but the idea that he isn't - that he might really be slowly suffocating - is too troubling to ignore. It gets under Melo's skin.

It doesn't hurt that Will is, in fact, having some difficulty getting his breath through the thick, soggy cloth, though certainly the anxiety provoked by being trapped is contributing to that.

Eventually, he sighs and gets up. Melo circles around behind Will and peels the gag off from the back of his head and tosses it, with a certain degree of disgust, onto the break room table.

Blood and hair and drool , Will thinks. *I'm leaving a mountain of DNA evidence thanks to these assholes.*

Melo sits down again, sullenly, to keep watch.

Will spends a few minutes catching his breath. He keeps his head bowed, hair dangling down over his eyes, looking as beaten down as he can make himself look, but he's thinking hard.

When he lifts his head he starts to say, "Thank -" but Melo cuts him off.

"Don't talk to me."

Will pauses for a few long moments, biting his lower lip like his feelings have been hurt. "I just - I could use some water, is the thing. Please."

Melo curses under his breath and gets up to rummage around in the break room fridge. He finds a half full water bottle and twists the lid off, then brings it over to Will. Melo holds it up while Will drinks.

Will feels pathetic - embarrassed for himself - but he really is terribly thirsty, so he gulps at the water, trying to keep too much of it from running down his chin, as Melo holds the bottle at an odd angle for the sake of keeping as far away from Will as he can.

And also, he knows this is exactly what he needs to do; he needs for Melo to feel invested in his well-being by the weight of the care he's already put into Will, while still being frightened of him - just not as frightened of Will as he is of Hannibal. And, of course, Will needs to turn him against the others, but that's the easy part.

When Melo takes the bottle away and steps back, Will sees that he is staring at Will's right hand.

A small blessing, that none of them have up until this point tried to take his gloves off, and now Will at first thinks those gloves are what have caught Mel's attention.

"Are you curious why I'm wearing gloves?" Will suggests, and as he says it he is simultaneously battling down the dread of having his hands seen and judged while also trying to decide the best story to tell.

Admit that I did it to myself or imply that Hannibal did it? he wonders. *What would be the impact of 'If I did this imagine what I'm capable of doing to someone else?' versus 'If he mauled his lover like this consider what he might do to you?' be?*

The latter would be more effective, Will is sure, but he is uncertain if it is a lie he could really sell.

It's all moot, anyway, because Melo is shaking his head with sincere indifference.

He says, "I was just looking at your ring."

Will feels a moment of stupid wounded outrage in which he wants to beg the kid not to take it, but then common sense asserts itself and he thinks, *Fuck it.*

Hannibal has already lost the original ring that Will bought him; married inmates at the prison and BSHCI were permitted only simple wedding bands, and since Hannibal was facing kidnapping charges on top of not actually being married to Will, he certainly wasn't allowed to wear the engagement ring. It's still sitting in some storage locker somewhere, unless someone pocketed it.

Will has been meaning to commission a replacement; he can get a new one for himself as well, if he makes it out of this mess.

Anyway, it's a marvel that one of the others haven't taken it already; Will wonders if they've assumed that it's too dramatically ostentatious to be real.

So instead of implying that Melo means to steal it, Will angles to make a gift of it.

He is wearing the ring on top of the glove on his right hand, as his left ring finger is essentially dead to movement and sensation, and now Will flexes that finger to make the ring sparkle under the halogen lights.

"Do you want it?" he asks. "You can have it," Will assures him. He debates pointing out that the ring is worth more than Melo's cut for bringing him in, then decides against it.

Melo looks up at Will, his eyes narrowed, and Will sees that he has offended him. *Ridiculous overreaction,* Will thinks, but there's something almost endearing about it, too; Will knows that he too is apt to draw his own lines in the sand at odd places.

"Man, I don't want your fucking wedding ring," he says, and Will doesn't bother to correct him that it is an engagement ring.

Reaching down with one finger to poke Will's ring finger, he turns the ring to look at it from a different angle. Blood is drying on the edges of the two raised stones.

Melo asked, "Is it made special to cut people when you punch them?"

Will makes use of his delight. "That was my hope, when I commissioned it," he tells Melo. "I don't think the jeweller realized, or if he did he was tactful about it." He studies the ring, too. "I was a little worried the stones would break off if I really wailed on somebody, but it turned out alright."

"I guess so," Melo says, and runs a hand down his own scratched and bruising face.

"Aw," Will says, and with the right side of his face smiles a short, twitchy smile. "You can hardly blame me, though."

Melo makes a noise that is uncommitted but still annoyed, and Will thinks that, meathead though he may be, he might not have disliked the kid if they'd met under different circumstances.

That sense of almost liking Melo is, Will senses, potentially useful but not without its risks. He knows very well that genuinely liking someone can give you power over them - can render them helpless against you. That is, after all, how Hannibal won out against Will.

But…

Before he can work through the rest of the thought, the break room door opens, and Scott steps into the room.

"You're off the clock," he tells Melo casually. "It's my watch now. Ryan wants to talk to you."

Scott deigns to look Will's way, and Will is suddenly terrified by what he sees in his eyes.

He does not want Melo to go away - does not, under any circumstances, want to be left alone with Scott.

The fear is such that Will might have willingly debased himself to ask Melo to stay, but the words stick in his throat and by the time he finds his tongue the kid is already gone, retreating with relief from the room and Will's presence.

Scott steps towards him, and Will skins his lips back from his teeth and snarls.

Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

CW for threats of sexual violence in this one.

“You’ve got everybody else pissing themselves,” Scott tells Will. “But I’m not scared.”

As though to drive the point home, he hits Will, open handed, across the face. It’s intended to demean as much as to hurt, but more than that it is meant to convince Scott that Scott really isn’t frightened, despite the murder of his friend and the looming threat that Hannibal will come for them too and everything that Will has done to encourage them to feel unsettled and creeped out and in active danger.

Will understands that perfectly well - down in the core of himself he can relate to that intimately - but he’ll be damned if he gives the bastard what he wants so easily. So he draws back his cracked lips again, and bares his bloody teeth, and refuses to bow his head.

He gives his head a sharp jerk to clear the sweaty hair from his eyes, and meets Scott’s gaze. “Oh yeah, you’re a big tough guy,” Will says. “I’ve eaten better men than you for breakfast.”

When Scott leans in to slap him again, Will spits blood in his face.

The blow that follows is not a mocking slap but a full powered punch, and Will feels his lip smash against his teeth and one of his teeth snap free.

Will spits it into his lap and wonders distantly if there will be anything he can do about that when he gets out of here - if he ever does. There is not, to his knowledge, a dentist who offers the equivalent of Cordell’s quiet, under the table medical services, though probably dental work is not as risky as going to the hospital…

There is something in that thought that Will’s brain wants to latch onto, but Scott is pulling his arm back to hit him again, and -

And then Scott seems to change his mind. He takes a few steps back, taking in the picture of Will, blood and bound beneath defiant eyes, and through the dangling web of his wet hair Will sees with a cold shock of horror that the man is half hard. His hand reaches down to shift himself inside his jeans, absently and entirely without self-consciousness, and Will feels his own fear attempting to overwhelm him into an icy white haze.

Yet Will finds his own voice to be surprisingly mellow when he says, “I’ll bite it off and swallow you whole.”

The species of shame that passes over Scott's features is not that of a person who regrets unworthy thoughts or deeds, but of somehow who has been caught out and exposed.

And astonishingly - maybe suicidally - Will hears himself laughing.

Scott circles around behind him. There is a supply cabinet back there, Will remembers from when they brought him in here, and he hears Scott open it and begin to rummage inside.

It's now - when he can't see what the other man is doing - that Will's heart turns rabbity on him. His imagination is not his friend, and over the roaring in his ears Will hears his breathing turn frantic and shallow.

There's a rustle of plastic behind him, steps drawing near, and Will knows what is going to happen just before it does but there is not enough time to fill his lungs before the trash bag descends over his head and he tells himself that he will not panic but he knows that everyone always does.

There is a voice in his head that says, not for the first time since this has all begun, *so this is what it's like,* and internally he snarls at it to shut up.

He doesn't mean to kill you, Will tries to remind himself. *He just wants to hurt you some - to make you afraid. You aren't worth anything to him dead.*

But Scott is pulled the bag tight over his head, squashing his nose down in suddenly amplified agony as the fine broken bones grind together, and he tries to catch the plastic between his teeth - to suck it into his mouth and tear at it with his teeth - but there is no give in it, and the plastic against his skin is already humid and wet, the opacity of the bag becoming obscured by the condensation of his stale breath and smeared with the blood that was on his face, and he feels Scott knot the bag at the back of his neck so he can circle back around the chair and lean over Will to watch his face as he suffocates, and Will's lungs burn and his chest spasms in useless agony and behind the foggy plastic the world swims, and Will feels himself just on the verge of blacking out when Scott deigns to loosen the bag long enough for him to draw in a few blessed, rasping breaths before he cuts off the air again, and all of this is repeated four more times before an end comes to it.

Emilio enters the break room a step behind Kevin and sees what is happening.

"What the fuck are you doing?" Emilio means to shout, but it comes out as a shocked whisper, so faint that Scott doesn't turn to look.

Scott is engrossed in Graham, who is smothering inside a clear plastic trash bag that has been tied over his head, as his fingers claw at the arms of the chair and his chest heaves rapidly and his body strains against the ropes, and the sense of unreality that fell over him when Emilio saw the picture of Blake that Lecter sent them descends over him once again.

Emilio looks around desperately for someone else to do something about this.

“What the fuck is he doing?” Emilio demands of Kevin, and Scott hears him that time and looks their way, but Emilio cannot focus on that now because Kevin is putting his hands in his pockets, as though to hide them.

Kevin is looking down at the floor, and does not answer him.

Kevin is turning and striding from the room, bumping against Emilio’s shoulder as he goes, and now it is only Emilio and Scott and Graham, and Scott has forgotten about Graham.

Scott has backed away from Graham, but he looks ready for a fight. He not much bigger than Emilio, but he is a vicious and experienced brawler, and more importantly there is a big knife sheathed on the side of Scott’s belt and a small gun in the shoulder holster under his jacket. Emilio is not armed, and is in no way certain he could use such weapons against someone else even if he needed to.

But Graham is losing consciousness. Graham is making horrid, embarrassing noises, and Emilio comes forward as quickly as he can and tears open the bag where it covers Graham’s face. Emilio’s fingers brush Graham’s lips, but it does not occur to him to fear the teeth.

Graham does not seem to be breathing, and for a long moment Emilio thinks that he must be dead, but then his body jerks as he draws in a convulsive gasp and he is breathing again, pulling in air in heaving, rasping breathes, and yet he has not spent much time making up for lost air when he lifts his head and spears Scott with his eyes.

“You,” he begins, but can not immediately finish.

He takes four starving breathes before trying again.

“You,” Graham says between gasps, “are going to learn what it feels like to scream when you no longer have a face.”

Emilio watches Scott take a step towards Graham, then he sees the thing that is in Graham’s eyes get inside of Scott; it burrows under Scott’s skin, poisoning him with a fear that makes him sway uncertainty on his feet.

Scott turns and flees the room, moving away from them in a walk that is just short of a run, and then it is just Graham and Emilio.

Chapter 17

Graham won't stop shaking.

Emilio knows the chill isn't the problem, but he says, "I'll be right back," and goes to look for something to cover him with anyway.

Kevin is watching the entrance next to the loading bay. Scott is next to him, and his mouth is moving. Emilio wonders what he is telling him, and if Kevin believes it. He doesn't see Ryan, but thinks he might still be keeping guard at the fire exit on the other end of the building.

Opening the back of the van, Emilio unzips his own suitcase. There's an oversized red button-up sweater jacket in the there, and he takes it out and hurries back to the breakroom and Graham.

He drapes the sweater over Graham's shoulders. The selves pool in his lap.

Graham lifts his head and his eyes meet Emilio's. "Thank you," he says.

His face is filthy, and Emilio hates to look at it, but he doesn't dare to try to clean it or to offer to let Graham do so himself; the ache in his bitten shoulder doesn't allow him to forget how dangerous Graham's mouth is.

"No problem," Emilio says stiffly.

As the quiet drags on, Emilio thinks that he ought to just leave. He wonders why he hasn't yet.

Then, soft as the flutter of a bird's wing, Graham says, "Your friend isn't a good person."

"They aren't my friends."

"How come you're with them, then?"

"I don't even know, man. Christ, I want to get out of here."

Graham leans as far forward as the ropes will allow. "You can't do that," he tells Emilio, and there is an intensity in his eyes that makes it impossible for Emilio to look away. "If you leave me behind to be arrested I won't be able to protect you. He'll come looking for you, just like he will all the others, and he will find you, and when he does he will kill you horribly. If I'm in prison I won't be able to tell him how you helped me, and I won't be able to stop him."

Graham's gaze is mesmerizing. Emilio feels like a rabbit transfixed by the viper's stare; yet, there is such a massive weight of concern in it that it seems impossible not to believe that

Graham really does care when he says, “I don’t want for you to suffer like that. I don’t want you to die.”

Will sees Melo teetering on the verge of making a decision. He feels his entire future balanced on the head of pin.

He says, “I want you take out your phone, and I want you google the name ‘Hannibal Lecter.’ I want you to look very closely at the pictures you find, and not just for the sake of being able to spot him in a crowd. Don’t look at his body, or the handcuffs and shackles he’s wearing.

“Look closer. Look him in the eyes.” Reluctantly, Melo is doing what he says. “There’s something missing, isn’t there? An intensity that shows something about him isn't quite right?”

He lets Melo stare for a long time, knowing that his fear will go a long way toward encouraging him to see exactly what Will wants him to see; he could tell him that Hannibal’s eyes were maroon and right now Melo would agree.

Then Will says, “Now do something else for me,” and he gives Melo the name of a popular website that specializes in hosting leaked police photos and other extreme gore. He spells Mason Verger’s name out loud, so there can be no confusion.

He hears Melo gasp when he opens the first of the pictures, and knows that he has all but won. Crime scene photographers have no sense of aesthetics. Will has seen the pictures before, and he knows that the lightning is stark and ugly, rendering Mason’s blood a gaudy, almost orange, color.

It would be difficult, even for someone accustomed to seeing the wonder in such things, as Will is, to understand from the pictures how beautiful it had been, and it does not benefit Will now to encourage such appreciation in Melo.

He wants Melo scared. Will wants him to be thinking about his own body rendered into such a state, and the pain that would come first.

Will can see Melo swiping through the collection of photos, his hand shaking as he touches the cellphone screen.

“Mason threatened me briefly with a small knife, and he was rude to me, and Hannibal spent three hours cutting on him before he was allowed to die,” Will tells him. “What do you think he is going to do to the people you are with when he sees what they have done to me?”

Melo looks up from his screen, and Will sees in the depths of the terror that fills his wide dark eyes that he has won, and with that knowledge comes a quiet sense of power.

“Give me a phone and cut me loose,” Will tells him, answering Melo’s unvoiced question. “And then get out of here as fast as you can.”

Emilio’s knife is nothing special - little more than a pen knife, and a dull one at that - and it takes him to cut through the first of the ropes.

He tries not to think too much, but his emotions are a jumble inside of him. He feels himself to be a patsy and a traitor and a coward, and in some corner of himself there is something like pride at doing if not the right thing then at least the best thing that he can, at this junction, manage. There is spite too, perhaps, a desire for vengeance not only for what Scott did to Graham and for the way Kevin saw and still turned away, but for every slight Ryan and his friends have made against Emilio since this farce of a hunting trip began.

But he’s terrified, too - that Graham will hurt him, either as soon as he has a chance or at his leisure, and of whatever else might happen if he should get out of this alive. He wonders about the potentiality for guilt.

Graham does not claw at him when his right hand comes free from the ropes. He flexes his fingers and bends his wrist, wincing, and then he holds his hand out for the phone.

Wondering if he is damning himself, Emilio places it in his hand.

Chapter 18

Will rises from his bonds.

He stretches his body, feeling every ache and bruise and bloody wound. The pain as circulation returns to his numb limbs is as acute as it is welcome, and he runs his hands down his face and finds his skin to be crusty with blood.

Melo is staring at him, transfixed with fear as though he has found himself in the same room as an uncaged lion, and Will takes a moment to drink that drink in. It nourishes him.

Then he moves his hands in a shoo fly gesture.

Melo doesn't need to be told twice.

Emilio passes through the hallway that leads to the breakroom, past the bathrooms and out onto the factory floor. Kevin is still watching the door next to the loading bay, but he doesn't see Ryan and Scott. He wonders if they are watching the other doors, and considers going to check - it might be that he could easily slip out the employee entrance or the fire doors, but then he glances back at Kevin.

The guy looks miserable and strained.

What friendly feelings Emilio might have been developing for Kevin evaporated when he turned away from what Scott was doing to Graham and left him to handle the situation on his own, but he thinks, maybe, the man's chief sin is being stupidly loyal to his friends, and that makes his culpability in all of this feel somehow reduced.
He thinks he can live with his role in getting Scott and Ryan killed, but…

But almost against his will, he approaches Kevin.

"Hey, man, what are you doing?"

"Keeping watch," Kevin says, without turning to face him. Emilio thinks that he is embarrassed, if not ashamed, over what happened earlier.

"Yeah, I know, but watching for what?"

"Just watching."

"Lecter has no way of knowing we're here."

Kevin turns to look at him, and Emilio sees now that a sense of fury has joined his embarrassment. It shocks Emilio. "Just because you're so damn smart doesn't mean everyone else is dumb."

And Emilio, who has no illusions about his own relative intelligence but who knows outright dumb as a brick stupid when he sees it and who knows that he's seeing it now, puts his hands up in an attempt to pacify Kevin.

"We aren't supposed to be in here," Kevin says flatly, "so I am watching for cops and night watchmen and things."

Emilio wonders what he expects to do if he sees any cops or security guards - and what Kevin thinks they will do if they see him. It seems to him that it would be smarter to turn the lights off and stay away from the windows - maybe go hang out in the manager's office or the breakroom and work on getting a plan put together - but he doesn't suggest it.

"Listen, I was thinking - I'm freaking starving," Emilio says. "Why don't we go pick up some breakfast and bring it back for everyone? You could drive the van."

"Dude, what are you talking about? We've got a crisis going on here, we can't just go pick up some donuts or whatever."

Emilio says lamely, "Can't fight on an empty stomach, and who knows how much longer this is going to run on?"

"I had an idea about that," Kevin says, and now in his excitement he is forgetting to be defensive with Emilio. "I was thinking, we could use Graham as a honey pot. Send Lecter his picture along with this address, then leave Graham in the breakroom and hide out in the bathrooms in the hallway leading to it. You know the ones I mean?" Emilio nods and tries to keep his face neutral. "Corral him when he comes to get Graham. Easy as that."

"What if he has a gun, though?" Emilio asks. The sullen look is back on Kevin's face but he goes on. "What if Lecter has an automatic, even, and he works out what you are trying to spring on him, and he sweeps the bathroom."

"I don't think -" Kevin starts, and Emilio thinks that's the problem exactly - none of them thought how different this was going to be from the bounties they were used to hunting; the only extra thought they seem to have put into it was roping Emilio in to translate while they are in Brazil, and he doesn't even speak the right language.

"Listen, man - just listen, okay?" Emilio says, desperate now. "This isn't going to go the way you think. These guys didn't skip out on bail or miss a parole meeting. They aren't dealers or wife beaters or even sexual predators, okay? Listen - they're murderers.

"They don't have anything to lose except each other and their freedom, and if they get caught they aren't ever getting either of those things back again, so they will do anything to avoid getting caught - we already saw that, man. Blake being dead proves that.

"There's going to be an investigation into what happened to Blake, and what's it going to look like if all you guys have done is sit around guarding your bounty and hoping for a shot at the other one? What's it going to look like, when Graham tells everyone what Scott did to him? Maybe we can't really catch a lawsuit for beating up Graham when we were catching him but he's going to tell everyone about what Scott did to him, and I don't want connected to

that - I don't want my family to know I was wrapped up in something like that, and that's not the only thing; are you guys licensed to be catching bounties in this country - do you even know if you need to be?

“And never mind any of that, because what if Lecter gets the drop on us? Have you seen what he did to that Mason guy? None of this is worth the money. Let’s just fucking walk away before anyone else gets killed, okay? Let’s just go.”

But Kevin acts as though he’s heard almost nothing of what Emilio has said. “Never mind what Scott might have done to Graham - I don’t care what happens to a fucking criminal,” and there is a pause before Kevin adds, “not when one of my friends is dead,” and in that pause Emilio understands more than he wants to know; he understands that this isn’t the first time Scott has assaulted a fugitive for the pure pleasure of it, and if Kevin knows that then so does Ryan. Ryan might not be the sharpest knife in the box but he understands people; he was canny enough, after all, to talk Emilio into this mess.

“Whatever, man,” Emilio says. Minutes have ticked by, wasted on this conversation, and with every second that passes he finds himself less interested in saving Kevin than he is in getting out before Lecter shows up. “Whatever. I’m leaving. I’m fucking gone.”

Kevin says, “No you’re not.”

Emilio had been turning to get his bag from the van, but now he wheels back to face Kevin. He tries to hide how frightened his is, but Kevin sees it, of course. He just misreads what he sees.

“You let that little old gay dude get into your head, haven’t you?” Kevin says, and the scolding is almost friendly in nature. Emilio wonders if he should lie or tell the truth - wonders, in fact, what exactly the truth is. “His boyfriend is like sixiety and weighs about half of what I do, dude. He’s tied to a chair!”

“Lecter is fifty-two,” Emilio says, because it seems as though he ought to say something, and he remembers reading that below one of the pictures he looked at just a little while ago.

“Come on,” Kevin says, and grabs Emilio by the wrist. He begins to pull Emilio back toward the breakroom.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m going to tell him off for scaring you,” Kevin says, and yanks harder when Emilio tries to dig in his feet. He is pulled along, and now they are at the mouth of the hallway that leads to the breakroom. “Maybe I’m going to scare *him* a little bit too, so he stops showing off and learns how to behave -”

They are more than halfway down the hallway now and they can both see the empty chair through the breakroom door’s window. Kevin’s grip on Emilio’s wrist loosens, and he mutters, “What the hell?”

Kevin goes forward, alone, toward the breakroom. There is a nagging voice in the back of Emilio's head that says he should run for it, but the need to know what will happen next holds him transfixed. Will Graham kill Kevin when he passes through that door, or will Kevin best Graham and recapture him - maybe even kill him? And what, that insistent voice that is screaming at him to flee wonders, will Lecter do to him if he arrives here to find his lover dead or dying?

The door closes behind Kevin but doesn't latch, and Emilio stands dithering in the hallway for perhaps a minute, listening to the sounds of the large man hunting through the room's few hiding places, and then Kevin comes out again.

"Where the hell is Graham?"

"I don't know, man," Emilio says, honestly enough - though he is about to find out. "He… he's not in there?"

The door to the men's bathroom burst open, slamming against the wall with an explosive bang and arms close around Emilio from behind. He feels the prick of a blade against his throat, and looks down to see a black-leather clade hand holding a boxcutter.

"Stay calm," Graham's voice says into his ear, and the breath that carries the whispered words smells of blood.

Emilio is all out of calm. Kevin is bellowing Scott and Ryan's names and is pointing his gun at Emilio - at Graham behind him, he supposes, but that makes it no less terrifying - and Graham is twisting Emilio's arm behind his back, and Emilio feels trapped with no way out between a mess of people who want to do him harm, and Lecter is still coming, so he says, knowing as he says it that it is stupid thing to say but saying it anyway, "He messaged Lecter. We need to -"

But the blade is nipping at his throat, more sharply than before. Graham makes a *tsk tsk* sound in his ear and says, "I wish you hadn't told him that. It's too bad."

Scott appears at the mouth of the hallway now, too, his gun already drawn and his face a livid white, and as he inches closer to Kevin he says, "Someone killed Ryan."

"Someone is going to kill you pretty soon," Graham says, from behind the shield of Emilio's body, and Scott - who had been trying to watch the mouth of the hallway, jerks his head and his gun towards the voice, and Emilio sees that Scott means to shoot Graham and doesn't give damn if he hits Emilio in the process, and Graham sees it too and moves so his head is shielded behind Emilio's body.

His body wants to scream but Emilio can't seem to figure out how.

A shadow appears at the end of the hallway, and Emilio's mouth finally falls open, though if he means to try to distract Scott by begging for his life or to warn the others of the threat that is approaching them he doesn't know, and Graham wrenches his arm hard enough to pull a startled shout-scream from his lungs, and Scott and Kevin take the noise to be nothing more than a response to pain.

And then Lecter is upon them.

Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

There's no real question as to the outcome.

Last time, the four of them together only managed to take Will down by merit of overwhelming numbers, and because Will failed to recognize their intentions in time to arm himself, and even then it had been a close thing; Will knows that it was only bad luck that kept his teeth from closing around Melo's throat instead of his shoulder.

The odds are different now.

Will, quick and vicious as a mongoose, is utterly unconcerned with any harm his former captors might do him or that he might do to himself in the process of hurting them. Hannibal is even more keen of reflex, and has not suffered the extended battering to which Will has been subjected; he is still fresh, and the helpless, sickening rage he felt when he realized that Will had been taken from him has had hours to distill into a clear-eyed, inexorable desire to absolutely annihilate everything that has come between himself and Will.

Together, they are a force of nature.

Will waits as, silent and unobserved, Hannibal closes the distance between himself and Scott. It takes no more than a few seconds, and while Hannibal is doing that Will slips the box-cutter into a convenient pocket and grasps Melo by the back of the neck with one hand and the upper arm with the other. Melo, for his part, has turned his face away from the scene unfolding before them and has buried it against Will's chest, as though he thinks hiding in this way will afford him some kind of protection.

When everything is in place, Will and Hannibal act together.

With one hand Hannibal reaches over Scott to wrench the gun away, and with the other Hannibal hits him across the face open-handed, driving the side of his head into the wall hard enough to make the drywall crumble, and while that is happening Will shoves Melo at Kevin.

Kevin jerks his handgun upwards as the other man stumbles into him, discharging it into the ceiling, and that is the only action any of the guns see tonight. Kevin shoves Melo away, and it is only chance that he throws him to the right instead of the left, so that when Melo lands on his ass and scuttles backwards he retreats into the break room instead of toward the tiny shot at freedom afforded by the open end of the hallway. After that, he's out of the game.

Hannibal goes high on Kevin the same instant that Will darts around Melo and dives at Kevin's ankles. He goes down roaring with the outraged bafflement of a wounded bear, and that confusion is as gratifying as anything Will has ever known.

On his knees with his arm braced over Kevin's throat, Hannibal chokes him while Kevin tries to reach back and claw at Hannibal's face, and Will puts his hand into the pocket that he saw Kevin put the handcuffs in earlier and pulls them out. He catches Kevin's flailing hand, bending the fingers back so far that he hears the little bones cracking and popping, and locks the cuff around his wrist.

Hannibal has seen something happening behind Will, and without looking back - simply by the look in Hannibal's eyes and from the groaning - he knows that Scott is shaking off his daze and getting up again. Bouncing back to his feet Hannibal lets go of Kevin and goes to confront that threat, and before Kevin can suck in more than a gulp of breath Will is pounding on his chest with his balled fists, knocking the air from him.

What fight was left in Kevin disappears when Will feels at least one of his ribs crack beneath his fists, and the man tries to howl when Will flips him over and cuffs his hands behind his back, but what comes out is little more than a pathetic mewling. When Will stands, Kevin doesn't try to squirm away or climb to his feet.

When Will turns he sees that Hannibal already has Scott back on the ground, pinning the larger man with his arm wrenched up behind his back, and Will is glad that it's Hannibal who has taken him down; Will has big plans for Scott, but if he had been the first one to lay hands on him Will might not have been able to stop himself beating him to death with his fists.

Now, as Hannibal waits patiently for Will's aide, Will is able to be calm too. Hannibal has come prepared, and with his free hand he reaches into his jacket pocket and pulls out a bundle of rope, which he tosses to Will.

This is something Will is good at - he has taken down and incapacitated men much larger than himself by himself many times - and with Hannibal's help the task is completed in short order. The only snag is that his hands, damaged as they already were, are stubborn balls of white hot pain now, and that makes tying the knots a bit of a challenge.

Will manages, though, and ties them tighter than they really need to be. Scott doesn't give up the way Kevin does - Will is sure that he, of all his surviving companions, has the best idea of exactly how much trouble they are in - but there is little he can do in this position. For good measure - and the vindictive pleasure of it - once he's bond Scott's arms and ankles Will hogties him, too.

It's only then that he looks around to take stock of Melo. The damn fool has retreated further into the backroom. He hugs the rear corner, watching Will with wide, frightened eyes, and Will sees that he isn't going anywhere. Nonetheless, he nods at Hannibal to watch the door while he ties Kevin's ankles.

Then he turns his attention back to Melo.

If there had been a window during the short battle in which Melo might have at least tried to escape, it is closed now, and Will see Melo understand that and curse himself for missing it. Were he to try to bolt now it would be the easiest thing in the world for Will to intercept him, and Hannibal fills the only exit.

He is more scared of Hannibal than he is of Will, and Will sees that and closes half the distance between himself and the kid.

“Come here to me,” Will says, and - astonishingly - Melo does. He allows Will to tie his hands behind his back and his ankles together, though his breathing is racy with anxious terror. Will is careful that the knots don’t pinch.

Will puts his hand on Melo’s back and feels the rapid hammering of his heart, even though the fabric of Melo’s shirt and his own leather glove. He leads him to one of the chairs, Melo taking small hoping steps because of his tied legs, and pushes him down onto it. Then he ties Melo’s hands to the back of the chair so he won’t be able to get up again.

He becomes someone else when he steps away from Melo and into Hannibal’s waiting arms. They hold each other for a long time, indifferent to the pleading eyes watching them, and when Will finally pulls away he takes hold of Hannibal by both the wrists, so unwilling is he to move away from Hannibal's touch.

He holds Hannibal’s wrists, gently, in his aching hands, and looks up into his eyes.

“You’ve been wanting to see me work for a while now, haven’t you?” Will says.

Love brims in Hannibal’s eyes, and furious joy. He nods.

“Oh, you are going to see a show right here tonight,” Will tells him, and his voice is soft, warm with anticipated satisfaction.

Chapter End Notes

Go ahead and assume cw for extreme violence in the next couple of chapters.

Chapter 20

“I'm trying to decide exactly what I want to do here,” Will says speculatively, eyes moving down their line of captives. Hannibal is a quiet presence just over his shoulder, but he radiates approval and curious anticipation.

He's granted Kevin the indulgence of sitting up on the floor, his bond legs sticking out in front of him ramrod straight, but Scott is hogtied and gagged beside him. His eyes track Will, full of impotent hatred.

Melo is on Kevin’s other side, still tied to the chair. He doesn’t meet Will eyes. Head bowed, his eyes are fixed on some point in his lap. He is hyperventilating, and Will bends to chuck Melo under the chin to make him look up. Black, sweaty hair dangles over his eyes.

“Don’t make yourself blackout now,” Will advises him. “Who knows what might happen.”

He blinks rapidly at Will with miserable, panicked confusion, and Will explains calmly, “Your breathing. Try to slow your breathing.”

“I can’t,” Melo says, gasping rapid breaths coming between each word. “I can’t breathe.”

“You can if you try - nothing is stopping you from breathing, you’re only having a panic attack,” Will says patiently, remembering his own terrified struggle to get his breath, not so long ago, through the the stinking blood-slimmed gag. “Go ahead and try the best you can.”

He moves on to Kevin, who isn’t having the easiest time breathing either, though that’s owing more to the throbbing agony of the ribs that Will cracked than anything else.

When Will’s eyes fall on him, Kevin croaks, “Please don’t...”

“Please don’t what?” Will prompts, when he trails off. “Finish the thought. I’m curious.”

It pains Kevin’s chest to talk, and even verbalizing that which he so desperately does not want frightens him, but he makes the effort. “Please don’t kill us,” he says.

Noble, Will thinks, that *us* - deeply stupid, but noble. He has never taken more than one at a time, but he supposes most people in his situation would say, ‘Don’t kill me,’ instead, especially given this knowledge of what Scott has done to make himself a target.

Will is curious if he can break Kevin of that misplaced loyality.

“What’s under debate right now is not whether or not to kill you,” Will says, with a terrible patience. “We’ve already settled on that. What we are discussing now is the order in which to do so, and how much time we should spend hurting you first.”

Melo had been having some success at getting his breathing under control, but now he makes a small pained sound and begins to hyperventilate again. Will looks towards him, briefly, but

says nothing to him.

“I don’t have to tell you that, do I?” Will says, turning at last to Scott. “But whatever you’re expecting, I promise that it is going to be inconceivably worse.”

He pauses, wondering if he should leave it at that for now, but then he crouches down over Scott. His gloved hands dangle over his knees as he leans in, close enough to bite Scott’s nose off, should he care to do so. But, Will tells himself, all things in good time.

Scott is fighting the desire to blink, as Will stares into his upturned eye, and that eye is wide and as shiny as a wet marble.

Will says softly, “I am going to hurt you worse than I have ever hurt anyone in my entire life.”

He straightens and turns to look at Hannibal. “What do you think?” Will asks.

Will sees the puppyishness in him again, the way he did night Mason died, that almost childish joy in working bloody transformations. Despite all that eagerness, Hannibal defers to Will. “It’s your choice, Will. Whatever you like.”

Will holds his hand out, and Hannibal steps forward and offers his own. Will twines his arm around Hannibal’s and takes his hand. Then, Hannibal at his side, he turns back to the three captives.

He points at Melo with his chin, and says, “I want to put that one down pretty easy. I told him he’d get out of this if he helped me, and before he blew it for himself he did do a lot to -”

“You said that you wouldn’t -” Melo starts, breaking in.

“And you told,” Will comes back, just as quickly. “So that’s too bad, isn’t it?”

He looks up at Hannibal, dismissing Melo from the discussion - or rather, putting on his best act to convince Melo that’s what he’s doing. “I’ll just cut his throat or something simple like that.”

Will pauses for dramatic effect. “Unless - Do you still have those syringes I made you?”

He knows that Hannibal does; he watched Hannibal stitch a hidden pocket into the lining of his jacket when Will first gave him the syringes, in case he should run into trouble with Mr. Javok or anyone else, and they have only been taken out again to launder the coat.

“I’ve three,” Hannibal confirms unnecessarily.

“Okay, that’s good.” Will smiles brightly at Melo as Hannibal undoes his zipper to reach inside his jacket to take them out. “See? That’s not so bad.”

When Hannibal puts the syringes into Will’s hand Emilio loses control of himself. He strains against the ropes, and when that achieves nothing he begins to buck his body wildly, inasmuch as his binds will allow, and that sets the chair he is tied to wobbling.

Will catches the back of the chair with his free hand, lest Melo knock it over and crack his head on the concrete floor. He sits two of syringes carefully on the long break room table - he only needs the one, at least for right now - and then he circles around behind Melo.

The boy is trying with wretched desperation to look at Will from over his shoulder, his eyes wide and wet and weeping, and from his mouth come small frantic cries and words that join together oddly into half formed, hysterical thoughts, all of it pleading pleading *pleading* with Will *stop*, and even when it is already done with - when Will has sunk the needle into the meat of his upper arm and depressed the plunger - Melo does not seem to realize as much but goes on begging him to *wait*, to *stop*, to *please not do it*, though he begins to tire quickly.

Hannibal is watching Will curiously, the question in his eyes. Will holds a finger to his own lips, a shushing gesture none of the others can see.

Melo is falling quiet now. Will puts a hand on his shoulder and squeezes, and when Melo's head falls forward into his chest Will reaches under his jaw to feel for a pulse.

It's slow but strong enough that Will doesn't worry about it.

Will brushes his hands together and steps away from Melo with an air of finality. "Now that that's taken care of," he announces, "we can get down to business."

Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

Heads up = content warning for discussion of rape.

I didn't expect this chapter to be more than 800 words, but it got away from me...

It was like a dance, Will reflects later, their joint killing of the miserable excuse for a bounty hunter, and thinking back on how they'd moved together as one single viciously unforgiving unit, he will wonder why he never took Hannibal dancing, back when they were free to do so without the risk of drawing disaster down upon themselves.

He will wonder if Hannibal knows how to dance, and who - if anyone - he danced with last. Hannibal will seem to him to be made for dancing, as much as he is made for the work of the knife; to be made for everything that encompasses beauty and grace and deadly danger, and so, when things become difficult for Hannibal later, he will know how to help.

Now, not long after the start of the thing, the grace that flows between himself and Hannibal is theirs alone.

Kevin possesses none of it. Unbond and bloody he retreats before them, more foolish than ever in the terror of pain, scrabbling on his hands and knees into the corner and cowering against the wall when Will leans over him.

Will plays the tip of the hooked Spyderco blade down Kevin's chest, not pressing hard enough to draw more blood, but slicing through his shirt when it snags on the fabric.

Will smiles a soft little smile and says, "Are you frightened?"

"Yes," he says, watching Will's face like a deer caught in headlights.

"What are you frightened of?"

"Y-you," Kevin says, stuttering on the first syllable.

"You ought to be. We're going to really hurt you bad."

The promise seems to draw from Kevin some final reserve of moral outrage, and he protests, "This isn't fair."

"How is it not fair?" Will inquires. Behind him, he senses Hannibal drawing closer on nearly silent feet. His hand comes to rest on Will's shoulder.

“You’re the bad guys. I was just…”

“Just what?” Will asks soothingly. “I’m curious to hear.”

“I was just going along with my friends. It’s Ryan who took the job. And Scott -”

“Scott is going to be given his fair share, you don’t have to worry about that. It’s going to be a considerably larger helping than you get.”

Will turns his head to look at Scott. Above the gag his eyes seem as big as tea saucers. Will wonders if he fears rape.

Reaching back to touch Hannibal’s hand, Will shrugs it off gently and waves his hand for Hannibal to circle around to his left, which he does. Then he waits, giving Kevin time to take a breather and smiling helpfully whenever the man looks up long enough to meet his eyes.

“Alright,” Will says after a few minutes. “Time to stand up.”

“No,” Kevin says, but without defiance.

“Come on now, get up,” Will cajoles. Kevin shakes his head in useless denial.

Will folds his knife and pockets it. He smiles again, the expression sitting crooked on the left side of his face, and holds his hands out to Kevin.

“Here,” he says, “I’ll help you,” and Kevin is so hungry for mercy, and so desperate to believe that the kindness that Will is deliberately radiating will mean a reprieve that almost entirely against his own will he reaches up, seeking the offered comfort, and Will takes him by the wrists and pulls him back onto his feet, and then holds him immobile while Hannibal traces a cut across his back that bears the white of his ribs.
Kevin convulses with pain and sobs, his legs giving out under him. Will lets go of him, releasing his grip as though he’s just realized that he is wrist-deep in something disgusting.

But as soon as Kevin hits the concrete floor Will is crouched beside him, touching him gently with one hand, telling him that it’s alright, no one’s going to hurt him again, and then with the other using the knife to slice his shoulder down to the bone.

Kevin screams again and curls in over himself on his side. He has lost the dubious protection of the wall, and Hannibal is circling around them now. The knife in his hand gleams, and so do his slanted teeth as he skins his lips back to show them.

There is an almost delightful thrill to it, being at the center of the thing as Hannibal stalks around them, knowing that the danger that flows out in waves with every movement of Hannibal’s body will not fall on him.

Kevin tries to sit up, his jerky movements telegraphing a miserable agony as he attempts desperately to watch both Will and Hannibal.

“Oh, he’s a brute, isn’t he?” Will says, reaching back into his pocket for the knife with one hand even as he pats Kevin reassuringly on the shoulder. “I did try to warn you.”

When Will flicks the knife open with an experienced jerk of his wrist and slices a sudden diagonal line down Kevin's cheek, it is somehow still in the fool to look shocked - even hurt.

Fresh tears fall with the dripping blood, and Will leans back to drink in the sight, making his mouth into a sympathetic pucker. Kevin looks back at him in dumbfounded misery, still - after every blow and cut, even knowing his friends to be dead - unable to really comprehend how things could have gone so differently from how they were supposed to be.

It's the bafflement of someone who knew himself to be on the top suddenly finding that the script has been flipped, and when Will smiles at him again Kevin bolts, scrambling to his feet despite every hurt that's been done to him, and hurls himself through the break room door.

Hannibal lopes after him.

It is evident that he will have no trouble recapturing Kevin, and takes the moment to check on Melo. He strips off one of his gloves long enough to get a clearer feel for Melo's pulse, which is even and strong. His breathing is slow but unrestricted, and Will slips the glove back on, satisfied.

Scott is watching him, a species of calculation that probably passes as hope for him gleaming in otherwise terrified eyes. "Don't get the idea that this means there will be a reprieve for you," Will tells him.

"Tonight is a learning night," Will continues, conversationally. "I am learning about myself. Melo is going to teach me to exactly what extent I am capable of forgiveness, whereas you are going to provide me an education on the opposite extreme. I guess you'll learn a thing or two along the way as well, about me and about yourself."

Hannibal guides Kevin back into the break room with his hand wrapped around the back of his neck. Kevin is more sullen than ever now, as stubbornly resigned as a child about to face a beating he feels to be undeserved, and if Will were less perceptive he might not have noticed how that much of a mask that is for the mortal terror roiling beneath.

Will jerks his head towards the floor and Hannibal gives Kevin a hard shove, and he lands on his side and roles over, arms curled around his aching chest as he groans. Will supposes they are risking a punctured lung, roughing him up with all those little bone splinters possibly floating around in his chest, but it hardly makes any difference.

He leans over Kevin and takes him by the shoulder to turn him onto his back, giving no special attention to the way he whimpers and tries to cringe away, and then pins him there with a hand over the center of his breastbone.

Kevin looks up at him resentfully, and Will watches his face carefully in preparation for watching what Kevin's eyes will do, and then says, "Your friend is a rapist. Did you know that?

"He hurt me the way he did because he was afraid to hurt me the way he really wanted to, but if I'd been someone else - someone more vulnerable, less able or willing to defend myself - it would have been a different story, wouldn't it?"

Beneath him, Kevin's eyes cut away, and Will sees that he was right, and that Kevin knew. He glances over at Scott, and the furious resent Will sees on his face is far removed from shame as can be; he is only angry that this thing has been brought out into the open.

"How many other times have you turned your back and walked away?"

Kevin lifts his head and roars at Will, "You bastards *killed my friends!* "

Will had not been aware Hannibal was so close to until his hand darts out and grabs a fistful of Kevin's hair. He slams his head - hard - against the concrete floor.

Kevin is knocked off track but not deterred. "You're murders. You're no fucking better - you're worse."

"I wouldn't know about that," Will says flatly. "I've never been murdered so I don't have a standard of comparison."

"It's worse," Kevin insists.

Will responds without hesitation. "Too bad for you, then, that I don't take requests."

There is a gentle brush of fingers against Will's upper arm, and he turns his head to see Hannibal watching him, his face striped naked in anticipation of a blow. Will has not told him what happened while he was being held captive, and he sees in Hannibal a vulnerability to Will's emotional state that is born of equal parts love and guilt at having failed to protect him.

The smile Will gives him is qualitatively different from the ones he has directed at Kevin tonight. It reassures Hannibal that Will is mostly okay, and whatever support he might need he is willing to accept graciously.

"I'm tired of him," Will says flippantly. "How would you like to do this?"

And maybe Hannibal has guessed, somehow, what was done to Will, because he says, "Do you remember the trucker?"

"Oh yes."

"I remember thinking," Hannibal begins, almost shyly, "how interesting it would be to take him just to the brink of drowning, just in time to let him take a fresh breath or two before pushing him under again - of being curious of what would happen if we repeated that again and again."

Beneath Will's palm Kevin begins to struggle to get up, pieces clicking together for him and a new awareness of what he ought to expect next and the horror that came with it granting him a second wind.

Will moves to pin him down more effectively - a task that is not difficult - before looking up at Hannibal to grin in open delight. He says, "There are plastic bags in the storage cabinet, unless you would rather use your hands."

Hannibal, of course, goes with the second option.

Nearly an hour later, when Will and Hannibal are finally done with Kevin, and having allowed him, blue-lipped and bloody nosed and with bruises already blooming around his jaw and nose and throat from Hannibal's careful ministrations, to fade into unconsciousness and stay there at last, they turn their attention to Scott, but what happens in the long hours that follow is too terrible to convey.

Chapter 22

Emilio comes awake slowly.

There are noises happening, somewhere behind him, and they are awful and pathetic and he can not tell for sure if there are words in the gurgling broken screeching or if it is only animal sounds. He wants to believe that it is just an animal, but in his heart he knows better.

You are going to learn what it feels like to scream without a face, Emilio remembers Will promising Scott, and the terror that follows is almost enough to send him sinking back into blackness.

Behind him, an unfamiliar voice says, “The other one is awake. Shall we call this job finished?”

“No,” Emilio hears Graham say. “He’s not going to die yet - not until I’m good and ready.”

Then Graham says, “Give Melo another shot, won’t you, hun? I wouldn’t like to scar him.”

The man is nearly silent on his feet, but Emilio feels the presence looming behind him just before the bite of the needle sinks into his flesh.

A few moments later the screaming begins again, and it follows Emilio down into the darkness.

When Emilio wakes up he is still tied to the chair.

Graham sits across from him in another chair, only a foot of empty space between their knees. He is watching Emilio with shiny, curious eyes.

There is blood on Graham’s mouth. It is drying in scraggly lines on the underside of Graham’s jaw and his neck, having dripped down his chin. There is blood in his hair, matting the curls against his scalp in places, and blood speckles the front of his shirt. The black gloves he wears over his hands gleam with a red sheen of drying blood, and that blood also runs up past the gloves to coat his forearms.

There is no part of Graham that is innocent of blood. He opens his mouth to smile at Emilio, and he sees that there is blood on Graham’s teeth.

A noise wants to come out of Emilio’s throat, but he chokes on it before it can escape.

Graham says, “I was sitting here waiting for you to wake up and thinking how I’d like to hit you across the face when you did, for the way you sucker punched me earlier. But my damn hands hurt too much already.”

Emilio watches him raise them a few inches above his lap and then let them fall again with a slight wince.

He doesn't what he's going to say until the words come out of his mouth. "I wasn't sure if you knew that was me."

Graham smiles knowingly. It takes Emilio a moment to read that expression, but that he thinks, *He is having an incredible lot of fun.*

"What are you going to do to me?" Emilio asks, and the evenness of his own voice surprises him; the memory of Scott's screaming is still in the front of his mind, and Emilio is not sure how he manages to sound so calm, but there is a level on which he is proud of himself.

He thinks maybe there is something like pride in Graham's eyes as he looks back at him - approval, perhaps - and wonders if that idea is ridiculous.

Graham doesn't answer the question directly. "I looked at the timesheets," he tells Emilio. "The next shift starts Monday morning at eight sharp."

Emilio has to stop to think about how long from now that is, and finds he doesn't know. They picked Graham up off the street just after dark on Thursday evening, and it was Friday morning when Lecter fell on them, but he has no idea how long he was unconscious.

"There's a clock on the wall," Graham offers helpfully, and Emilio follows the path of his gaze and sees that he is right. The hands of the clock say that is is almost three.

Emilio's lips are dry. "Is that PM or AM?" he asks.

"Knowing the answer to that would sure make the next couple of days easier on you, wouldn't it?" Graham says, and slides up from his chair to step out of Emilio's line of sight. He hears the break room door open and then click shut.

According to the clock, Graham is gone about seven minutes.

When he comes back, he's less bloody. Most of the drying blood has been washed away from his face and forearms, and the leather gloves are soggy but mainly clean.

He has a big water bottle, which he holds up for Emilio to see. "You had better drink as much as you can," Graham advises him.

It is embarrassing to have Graham hold the bottle up for him, but Emilio does his best to follow the instructions. The cold water sloshes painfully in his anxious belly, and he has to turn his head away before the bottle is empty, for fear of throwing up what he's already drunk.

"You sure?" Graham asks. Emilio nods his head sickly. "Alright, but this time tomorrow you'll be cursing yourself for not taking more."

"I'll die if you leave me here all weekend," Emilio says, and now the fear is coming into his voice. He knows that the others are behind him - that their bodies are there, where he can't

see them, and the idea of being left alone with the corpses fills him with sick terror.

“Nah,” Graham says casually. “You won’t die - at least not if you have the sense to drink some more water now - though you’ll probably feel like you want to before it’s all said and done with. Getting pins and needles already, aren’t you?”

Emilio nods miserably; his hands are numb and the muscles in his ankles are cramping, threatening to develop into a matched pair of Charlie horses.

“Not comfortable,” Graham says. “I know it.”

“The rats,” Emilio says, thinking of the balls of grey fur that he’s seen darting around the factory. “Man, they’ll bite me.”

“I don’t think they’ll bother. I’ve left them easier meat. Would you like to see?”

Seeing the way Graham was smeared with blood and gore already told Emilio more than he wants to know, and he shakes his head desperately.

“Good,” Graham says, and picks up the bottle again. “More water?”

Emilio drinks as deeply as he can.

Chapter 23

“You aren’t worried,” Melo asks tentatively, “that I’ll talk to the police?”

Will nearly laughs. “Of course you’ll talk to the police - they aren’t likely to just let you wander off without so much as a statement. But there’s not really much of importance that you can tell them that they won’t find out on their own.”

That’s not entirely true; the crime scene is a wealth of forensic information, and Will takes it as granted that the dead bounty hunters will have discussed where they were going and why, both online and off, so there is absolutely no expectation that all the carnage won’t be traced back to himself and Hannibal. But Melo can, among other things, inform the authorities that Will is, for some reason, concealing his hands under leather gloves.

Nonetheless, Will has decided to take the chance.

Will feels good about doing so, and about the way all of this has played out. It feels like he has found the perfect balance of himself; there is blood under his nails and between his teeth, and a certain amount of warm raw meat in his belly, but he is demonstrating now that it is in himself to make mercy as well as murder.

And better yet, Hannibal has been with him throughout, watching Will as he savaged Scott greater with brutality than he’d ever before exercised, his teeth and hands doing as much or more work as the knife as he pulled back skin to reveal the twitching muscle beneath and tore away piece after piece from the howling thing that had still been, in the corners of its mind that remained lucid enough to understand what was being done to it, another unique and real human being, regardless of how flawed.

Hannibal witnessed every minute of that, but he also saw Will’s eagerness to grant Melo a reprieve, saw the surprising pleasure that Will has discovered, only recently, in choosing to let someone go when he doesn’t have to.

Hannibal saw everything, the best of the worst of what Will is, and approved of it all - of all of Will. And Will can barely credit, now, how *good* that makes him feels.

Will can remember how, not all that long ago, he had been absolutely certain that Hannibal really understanding the truth of him would not be survivable - that such knowledge would mean Hannibal’s death, or else Will’s own.

When things with Scott were over with Hannibal had wanted to hold Will again, and Will was pleased to let him, though by then the aching exhaustion of his own body, previously dimmed by the pleasure in his awareness of the agony he was bringing down upon someone who had done him harm, was reasserting itself.

The violence moved Hannibal emotionally; it was, Will understands, beautiful to him.

But there was more to it than that. There was fear in the ferocious way in which Hannibal clutched Will against him, and Will understood that it was not fear of Will himself but at having come so close to losing him. “I was worried that I would never see you again,” Hannibal said, and in the roughness of his low voice Will heard the tears building.

“Shhhh,” Will said gently, swaying his body so the both of them rocked, slowly, as one. A lot of the tension had begun to go out of Hannibal’s body, but he still needed to take some time to cry.

That was alright. Will hadn’t minded comforting him.

When Hannibal felt a bit better they worked out a plan.

“What do you mean to do with that last one?” Hannibal asked, and Will told him.

Taking the bounty hunter’s rental, Hannibal left to exchange it for something less traceable. After that, they decided, he would go back to the beach house to retrieve their possessions and the dog and cat, while Will stayed here to manage this last part.

Now, Will is fiddling idly with Kevin’s phone when Melo begins to squirm, as much as the ropes will allow for squirming, trying to cross his legs.

When Will looks up from the phone Melo drops his eyes, embarrassed.

“What’s the matter?” Will asks, though he can guess easily enough; when Will finally made it to the bathroom, right after Melo let him go, he thinks he spent at least three minutes in front of the urinal.

“Nothing,” Melo says quickly. “I’m fine.” But a few seconds later he is squirming again despite himself.

Will sighs and takes out his knife.

It’s inevitable that the kid will wet himself before the weekend is over, but Will doesn’t want to be around to see when it happens; the second-hand embarrassment is like to be murder.

Melo’s eyes go large and frightened when he sees the knife in Will’s hand, and Will rolls his own and says, “Don’t piss yourself - just give me a damn minute here.”

As he cuts the ropes away, Will tells him casually, “If you try to fight me, or run, or do anything else that I don’t like, I will knock you down and I will bite you and I won’t stop until you are dead. You understand that, don’t you?”

Melo’s head goes up and down jerkily.

The kid’s legs are cramped and weak from lack of circulation, and when Melo struggles up to his feet he wobbles perilously, and Will sighs elaborately and reaches for his forearm to steady him.

Will glances back at the path they will have to traverse between here and the break room door. It's pretty gruesome, he has to admit. "Maybe you should just close your eyes," he suggests.

The bodies and the idea of seeing the bodies frightens him, and Melo tries to follow directions, squeezing his eyes shut as though his life depends on not letting a single ray of light or flash of color penetrate his lids, and allows Will to lead him forward. When his legs threaten to give out he leans against Will, clutching at him for balance.

When they pass through the doorway, though, Melo opens his eyes and looks back into the break room in spite of himself, just before the door swings shut. Whatever it is that he glimpses, it turns his complexion grey and makes him shutter convulsively against Will.

"What did you see?"

"A hand…" he answers shakily. "I think that it was a hand."

"Hard to say for sure, isn't it?"

Will leaves Melo in the bathroom, knowing that he won't dare to try anything, and goes back to the breakroom to retrieve the water bottle and the handcuffs. He's cold, his skin still chilled by the sweat and blood that the work on Scott inspired, and he finds the red sweater jacket that Melo gave him earlier and draws it on. It's laughably outsized on Will's frame, but at least it's warm.

He refills the bottle at the drinking fountain, and puts it in Melo's hand when he rejoins Will in the hallway.

Melo forces himself to make a cringing, grateful smile. It's easier for him to drink more when he is the one holding the bottle.

Will watches Melo. He is reconsidering his plan, and not only because the idea of trying to talk his aching hands into retying all those knots is daunting.

He has forgiven none of what was done to him, and he would like very much for Melo to spend the weekend coming to further understand and then eclipse the miserable, aching pain that Will himself suffered through during the hours when he was left tied to the chair. But there is no point to any of this if he doesn't survive the weekend, and while Will doesn't believe fatal dehydration is a real risk, he is thinking that leaving Melo's limbs bond for the next sixty or so hours might just be asking for a blood clot.

"I'm not your friend, you know," Will tells him. "I could still have a lot of fun killing you."

Melo swallows with a painful gulp and lowers the water bottle from his lips.

Will laughs brightly, teeth showing in his wide smile, and shakes his head at Melo like he's the silliest damn thing he's ever seen.

"Come on," he says, and Melo follows him like a duckling as Will leads him, not back into the break room but onto the factory floor.

There are heavy metal work tables out there, bolted to the floor, and Will instructs Melo to sit on the floor with his back against one of the table legs. Will kneels long enough to cuff Melo's wrists together behind his back, the table leg inside the loop his arms make. He's good and stuck, but he can at least shift his body around and move his legs.

"That's a little better, isn't it?"

"Yeah," Melo says, both in sincere relief and in hopes of keeping Will pacified.

Will is utterly exhausted. He carries himself over to the wall, maybe twenty feet away from Melo, and slides down it to sit on the floor.

He takes out his own phone and texts Hannibal. *Done here. ETA?*

The reply comes quickly. *Everything is packed up in the new car. Another hour and a half if traffic is good.*

OK, Will types. After a second's thought he adds, *Hurry back I love you,* and then hits SEND before self-consciousness can catch up with him.

Pulling off the sweater jacket and drawing it over himself like a blanket, Will leans back against the wall and tries to get a little sleep.

Chapter 24

Someone kicks Emilio's foot - not so hard that it really hurts him but hard enough to wake him up, and if he had time to think about it he might have wondered at his having been able to fall asleep in the first place.

But Graham is looming above him, and that shakes all else from his mind.

There's rage in the man's face, a panicked, vicious terror, and trying to make sense of where it has come from, Emilio thinks, *Something has happened to Lecter - he's been killed or taken in.*

He understands that Graham is dangerous all of the time, but he has seen the way that fear induces in him a particularly vindictive kind of violence, and that is what is radiating off of him now. There is more wrath in Graham's eyes and his face and in the way he holds his body then there had been when he promised to kill Schott, and all of it is laser focused on Emilio.

Ryan's phone is clutched in Graham's balled fist, and Emilio is trying to understand how that plays into whatever it is that's happening now when Graham says, "You've made a liar out of me."

"No," Emilio says, a bright haze of panic fogging his brain. "No, I didn't - I didn't do *anything*." When he doesn't answer, his mind starts to worry frantically at what Graham said, and begs desperately, "What does that mean? "Liar.' What does it -"

With barely contained fury, Graham raises his voice to speak over him. "I thought ya'll were freelance, but that's not true. Someone sicced you on us."

"I don't know anything about that," Emilio says, shouting now himself, as angry as he is desperate. "No one told me shit about anything. I was just along for the ride. You think I'd have come, if I'd known how dangerous it was going to be? They didn't tell me anything important, and I didn't ask because I didn't want to know anyway."

Graham watches him for what feels like a very long time.

Then he smiles. The expression feels almost sincere, but Emilio can tell that it is calculated to reassure, and the last shred of hope which he has been clinging to dies a quiet death.

Graham puts a calming hand on Emilio's shoulder, and it is all he can do not to buck away under the touch, or scream, or sob like a little child. He understands how that he is going to die after all, despite everything that has happened, and though he sincerely does not understand what has changed Graham's mind, he would at least like to maintain some dignity if he can.

"Hey, it's alright," Graham says, standing. "I believe you."

And Will does believe him - mostly - but it doesn't make a difference.

There is in Will none of the miserable hesitancy that overtook him back in the basement, when he became certain that he would have to kill Hannibal; Melo does not mean to Will what Hannibal meant to him, even way back then, but more importantly there is no room for such feelings inside of Will now, not when everything else has been engulfed by terror for Margot and their son.

On Ryan's phone he has found the emails that the bounty hunter and Cordell exchanged, in which Cordell told him where he and Hannibal were staying and how long they might be expected to be in the city, before offering a considerable bonus to the bounty the FBI already placed on their heads.

There is no sign from the messages that the two of them discussed anything other than the capture of Hannibal and himself and the transfer of funds, or that Ryan shared any of this with his friends - Will suspects that he meant to keep the entirety of the money Cordell offered for himself - but none of that matters, either. Even if Melo knows nothing of significance, Cordell will be waiting for Ryan to contact him, and he will be paying attention to the news.

If Cordell finds out what has happened before he can be taken out of the picture, he will bolt to the police for protection; he'll tell them everything he knows of Will and Hannibal, but more importantly he'll be sure to inform on Margot in the process, as well.

Will can make it difficult for the bodies to be identified - make this entire mess look like a drug deal gone bad, maybe - and that at least might buy them some time to figure out what to do. Hannibal took Blake's billfold at the same time he took his phone, and it's here with those belonging to the other bounty hunters, and it will be a simple enough matter to destroy these things as well as their phones.

Melo is another story, though. There is no credible way of believing that he will not tell the police everything he knows when he is found - which may well be before the next shift starts Monday morning - and even if he really is ignorant as to Cordell's role in all of this, a lone survivor of a bloodbath orchestrated by two international fugitives will make global news, and Cordell will know that he is in danger.

Will simply cannot justify the risk, not when Margot might catch charges for aiding and abetting their escape, but Will has no investment in frightening Melo anymore than he already is, nor any real desire to hurt him. Will only needs for him to be dead.

Casting about for the best way to do that, he remembers that there's still one syringe full of sedative in the breakroom; he can put the kid to sleep and figure out where to go from there.

He tries to reassure Melo that everything is alright before he goes back to the break room, but Will knows that he doesn't really buy it.

It occurs to him as he is walking back to call Margot - that calling her ought to have been the first thing he did, even before trying to scare a confession out of Melo, and he rushes into the break room for the privacy that it affords.

His body is catching up with him, and Will can barely hold the phone for the agony in his hands. He wonders how he will ever manage to kill Melo in this state, and thinks briefly of Scott's gun before deciding that he doesn't dare to risk the noise.

Hannibal would do it for me if I asked him, Will thinks, turning the idea over to try to decide how he feels about it as he waits for Margot to pick up on the other side of the line.

"Will?" he hears Margot say, a nearly bottomless relief in her voice, and suddenly what little composure he has left bolts away from him. He gets tangled in his own words, trying to articulate to her what has happened and the danger that she is in. Margot listens for perhaps thirty seconds before she cuts in, raising her voice over Will's until he falls silent to let her speak.

"Cordell is already in hand," she tells him, in the formal and tightly controlled voice that she oftens uses in regards to things that disturb or frighten her. "Some men in my employ have picked him up. He is being taken to one of Mason's… vacation homes. The one in Pennsylvania, on Treasure Lake. There are rooms there with doors that lock on the outside."

Passive voice, Will thinks. It has always been a bad sign in her.

"Hannibal and I discussed Cordell almost two days ago," Margot continues. "And he texted me last night to say that you were safe. He didn't tell you?"

Didn't want to ruin my fun, Will thinks, *or his own.* What he says is, "Things have been chaotic."

"How are -" Margot begins, but Will cuts her off. He cannot stomach right now her pity, nor her fear for his own well-being. He turns it back on her instead.

"Christ, I'm sorry for all of this," Will says. "What do you need? What can I do to help you?"

"You'll come, won't you - you and Hannibal both?"

"Of course," Will says. "I'll take care of it for you, don't worry about it."

It is, Will reflects, a good time of year to make someone disappear at a summer house off the lake, especially when that house is explicitly built to be a space in which one might inconspicuously commit atrocities.

They spend a few minutes discussing the practicalities of discreetly flying himself and Hannibal back to the United States.

Before the call ends, Will says, "I love you, Margot." Maybe he wouldn't have said it right then, if he wasn't so tired, but he needs reassurance - wants to hear her say it back, the way that she has before.

“I know,” Margot says, and hangs up the phone.

None of it makes any difference in regards to Melo; he is still a loose end and a potential threat, and Will secrets the last of the syringes in his pocket and goes back out onto the factory floor.

Melo has been pulling at the cuffs while Will was gone, and he only increases the efforts when he sees Will coming towards him, trying to wrench one hand or the other loose by throwing his body forward.

“You’re hurting yourself,” Will scolds, looking down at his chaffed and reddened wrists. Melo has torn the skin in places, too, and is bleeding. “There’s no call for that.”

Melo only stops struggling when Will crouches next to him and puts a steadying hand on his shoulder. He turns his head to look at Will through a curtain of sweaty hair, and though he’s been crying again when his eyes meet Will’s they look nearly bored with him.

“Stop jerking my chain and just kill me, if that’s what you’re going to do,” he says. There’s a short pause, that ghost of hope that Melo can’t quite shake off demanding that he give Will a chance to reassure him that this is not in the cards. When Will says nothing, Melo turns his head away and says, “I know that’s what you’re going to do.”

“It’s normal to be scared,” Will says, reaching for the syringe to draw it from his pocket. “But you only have to be afraid for a few more minutes.”

These days Will’s hands are often weak and unsteady even at the best of times, and now his entire body is the verge of nervous collapse, to say nothing of the way he strained those hands far past their usual limited savaging Scott.

His hand jitters, quite involuntarily, when Will takes out the syringe, and he drops it. The plunger pops out with an almost audible sound when it hits the ground, and the contents drip out onto the cement floor.

Will curses. The two of them look down at the spill, and then at the same time they lift their eyes to look at one another.

“Sorry,” Will tells him. “That’s going to complicated things a little.”

His cell chimes, and Will takes it out and sees Hannibal’s text. *Be there in just a minute,* it reads. *Open the garage door.*

Chapter 25

Will gestures for Hannibal to stay behind the wheel, circles around the front of the car to climb into the passenger seat. A pained sound slips from between his lips when he pulls the car door shut behind him.

“Are we ready to go?” Hannibal asks, knowing that something new has happened while he was gone. It’s more than pain and exhaustion feeding the agitation that is flowing off of Will in waves. Even more than that - where he is chained to the work table, Melo is folded in on himself, small with miserable resignation. If he believed that there was any chance that they were about to leave him in peace his manner would be one of anxious anticipation, Hannibal thinks - eager to see the last of them but worried that they might still change their minds.

“Not quite yet,” Will says. “Can you do me a favor?”

Hannibal is silent, looking out through the windshield at Melo’s curled form. He knows what Will wants - or thinks that he wants, or is trying to convince himself that he wants - but Hannibal won’t be the one to suggest it.

Will taps Hannibal’s shoulder gingerly with the back of his wrist to get his attention, and Hannibal deigns to look at him.

“You remember about the bug?”

Hannibal nods; the one Will had him get rid of because he couldn’t stomach the idea of killing it himself. That had barely been two days ago, but it feels like weeks have gone by since then.

He feels no inclination to argue on Melo’s behalf, but he worries for Will. “Killing him wouldn’t trouble me,” he says, “but I’d like to know why you changed your mind.”

“Cordell hired them.”

“I know.”

“I know that you know - I talked to Margot. The thing is that Cordell might have told them something that could link Margot back to us.”

Hannibal gives his head a small shake. “Cordell’s role was a secret between Blake and that other one - Ryan. They were going to keep the extra money for themselves. I found the messages on Blake’s phone.”

“Still,” Will say, stubborn. “No telling what they might have dropped in Melo’s hearing, deliberately or by mistake.”

“If Cordell wanted Margot to be implicated, he could have simply informed on us himself, and gotten the bounty in the process. He did all of this because he didn’t want to risk his

reputation with his clientele."

"Maybe Cordell was hoping these guys would think they made the connection themselves, and then Margot would be out of the picture, too, and his hands would still look clean."

"Will," Hannibal says, "I think that you're panicking."

Will moves to run his fingers through his hair, then winces and lowers his hand carefully back into his lap. "I know I am. I'm a fucking mess right now. But are you willing to bet Margot going to jail on my being wrong?"

"That depends on what's in the pot. His life or your emotional well-being?"

"My emotional well-being is just fine. This is all just a - it's just a lark. I'm playing a game with myself. He doesn't really matter one way or the other."

"Will -"

Bitterness clouds Will's face. "I'll give the next big ugly dudebro who calls me a faggot a clean pass, then I'll be even. That can be my good fucking deed."

"Will."

"What? Are you worried that I'll be angry with you, after the fact?"

The possibility does concern Hannibal, but he stays silent.

Anxiety and guilt fills the void, as they often do when Hannibal denies Will reassurance.

Will says, "I wouldn't have asked you. I was going to do it myself. But my hands are so fucked up, Hannibal -"

He curses. "I don't know what to do."

It was easier, Hannibal understands, for Will to manage his empathy for the roach by dismissing what he felt as nothing more than a silly little tug of his heartstrings. He is trying to do the same now in regards to Melo - to convince himself that he feel no real emotional connection, just inconvenient pity - but the difficulty of task is goading him towards anger; it's that anger that will fuel Will's violence towards Melo, should he decide to act on it.

Hannibal says finally, "If there is any chance that you're right, then it's not enough to achieve his silence by killing him. We need to know much he and his friends actually knew, and who they might have shared that knowledge with. Otherwise, Margot cannot properly evaluate the threat and act intelligently."

"You're right," Will says. "Fuck, I didn't even think of that…"

"You keep checking the phones," Hannibal tells him. "I'll go talk to him. If he knows he'll tell me."

From the way Will winced when Hannibal told him that he would go “talk” to Melo, Hannibal supposes that Will expected him to wring the truth from the dumb kid.

Instead, Hannibal pulls a packing container over to the work table, so he can settle across from Melo at close to his level without sitting on the floor, which is dirty.

Hannibal in no way relates to him, and he knows that the situation Melo has found himself in is fundamentally different from the time he himself woke up chained in Will’s basement, but it would hard not to see certain parallels. He folds his arms over his knees and says, "It's rough being under Will's thumb when he panics like this, isn't it?"

He watches something like hope begin to bloom in Melo; he has a terrible need to believe that there is someone reasonable whom he can turn to in this equation, and if that is not Will then he wants desperately to be allowed to cling to the hope that Hannibal won’t hurt him as long as he does as he’s told.

"Yeah,” Milo says, with a shaky laugh. “And for a long time there I thought you were the scary one..."

Hannibal steals that hope from him casually, with not a little relish.

"Ours is a relationship of equals," he tells Melo, and watches the fear begin to rise in him again.

“Please,” he says. “Listen, please - I’ve got a mother and a little sister. I’ve got to go home to them. They need me man, you know? I can’t -”

Hannibal cuts in, already tired of this line of conversation. “I want you to understand that I’m not wired to respond to begging - or at least, not in a way that you would like me to respond.”

It’s easy for Hannibal to understanding, watching the way that Melo looks at him, why Will takes such pleasure in imparting a horrifying truth about himself upon a victim and then absolutely destroying that person; it is a way of knowing one’s self, and being known.

He gives Melo a little while to stew in it, then he goes on. “I’m not emotionally invested in you or anything that happens to you.

“My commitment is to Will, almost exclusively, and you hurt him.”

“I’m sorry,” Melo says, and then just as quickly, “I wasn’t the one - I helped him. He said that he’d tell you that I helped him.”

Will has told Hannibal as much. He spent a lot of time talking about Melo while he was busy killing Scott, and that is part of the reason why Will’s sudden reversal troubles him now; the feelings had been there, and still are - the pity and the sympathy and even a degree of liking - and it seems perilous for Will to deny that now.

“Please don’t interrupt me again,” he says, and watches more of the color drain from Melo’s face in response to everything that lies beneath Hannibal’s mild tone.

“Will thinks that you are a patsy, and that makes him feel bad. He doesn’t especially want to hurt a kid who fell in with the wrong crowd, and whatever help you gave him notwithstanding, that’s why you are still alive.

“I’m not convinced,” he continues, “that that’s who you are, and even if he’s right it makes you no less vulgar, or greedy, or stupid. I don’t think you stumbled blindly into something bad by accident; I think that you simply chose to close your eyes.”

Hannibal leans forward. “I’d just as soon obliterate you as thoroughly as we did your friends.” He sees Melo’s desire to cut in to deny his association with the bounty hunters, and then Hannibal sees him stomp it down, just as quickly. “If your life was the only thing on the line right now I’d be happy to ensure that your mother and little sister be compelled to hold a closed casket funeral.

“But it would be better for Will if we didn’t kill you here tonight - provided you can convince us that you won’t do anything to make us regret it.”

“I’ll do anything you want.”

“I need you to tell me the truth. We’re going to go through things, piece by piece. The truth benefits you. Alright?”

“Okay,” Melo says, his voice tight.

He walks Melo through everything that has happened since Ryan approached him with the job, what the others told him about the situation and when they told him, and when Hannibal is convinced that he knows everything important he goes back to talk to Will.

Will has Winston in his lap, and his arms are hooked around the half-grown puppy gingerly, careful not to touch him with his aching hands. Hannibal slides in behind the wheel next to him.

He tells Will, "You don't have to worry about letting him live. He can't do anything to hurt Margot."

“You’re sure?”

“I am.”

“Then let’s go.”

Hannibal isn’t especially surprised by the answer, but he asks, “You have nothing more to say to him?”

Will looks out the window at Melo, who is watching him with a kind of desperate pleading that lacks any real hope. It occurs to Will that he could get one last rise out of him - smile, or shake his head sadly, or do any number of other things to convince him that his pardon has

been been turned down, but he's too tired. He feels about as tired as Melo looks, and Melo looks about ten years older than he did when this all started.

But it's not all a bad kind of tired on Will's end. He thinks, *I am going to be the most important figure in that guy's mind for the rest of his life. Everything that happens from this point on is going to be filtered through the lens of what I did and didn't do to him and why.*

That's power. That makes Will important.

"No," he tells Hannibal. "I want to wash my hands of this now. I want to go see Margot."

Hannibal backs the car out through the open garage door, then gets out from behind the wheel long enough to close it behind them, and they set out on the road.

Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

CW warning in this one for discussion of CSA/rape, though not in graphic detail.

Will is on the verge nodding off, head on his shoulder, jaw resting cozily against the fuzzy softness of the red sweater jacket, when the memory of Melo drawing it over his shoulders starts to weigh on him.

By then they are a few blocks away from the factory. “This isn’t right,” Will says. “Turn around - I have to go back.”

There is more to this than the sweater, of course, but articulating to Hannibal everything that is on his mind now would take more resources than Will can rally.

Hannibal’s face gives nothing away, but the way his hands tighten around the steering wheel marks his frustration. “Why?”

“This is his sweater. I need to give it back.”

“Will, he doesn't want it. There's blood on it.”

“I'm not a goddamned thief,” Will says, his bruised face clouding with stubborness. “Please, Hannibal, it's important.”

His sigh is nearly inaudible as he turns the car around.

When Hannibal once again parks the car inside the factory’s loading area, Will tells him, “Just stay here. I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

He shrugs the sweater off, feeling it all as he does so - everything that has been done to him and that he did to himself in the course of paying that violence back with interest. The tense, lingering ache in his shoulders and his spine from when he had fought against the bigger men and the rope they’d tied him with, and the bruises that wring his wrists, every other bruise and abrasion and cut, and beneath the pain a weariness that goes deeper than his bones.

And fear, too, as he contemplates approaching Melo again. Dread, as well. Not a little shame.

When Will pauses to fold the sweater neatly over his arm he notices something interesting printed the tag that is stitched into the collar.

The kid’s head hangs low, chin pressed against his chest, almost as though he is asleep, but Will can tell from the rapidity of his breathing that he is not.

“Emilio,” Will says, approaching him, and when he lifts his head Will sees the sweaty pallor of his skin and the way his gaping mouth tries to pull in air in with rapid heaving gasps that he is having another panic attack - worse, it seems, than the ones he had earlier.

It makes sense, Will supposes; he’d given Melo - Emilio - just enough time to be able to relax into the idea that he and Hannibal really were gone and that no further harm would come to him, to let some of the shock that allowed him to remain fairly stoic during their last conversation dissipate, and in the wake of that he was probably just beginning to really process the events of the night.

Now his tormentors have returned again, maybe to finish him off. Of course, it is all too much.

Will has spent so much time showing Emilio and his late companions just how ugly and vicious and dangerous he can be that cost him nothing to be kind now. He is ready to be kind - not a mocking parody of kindness but really kind - and touching him now would not be a kindness.

Instead, he says, “No one is going to hurt you, Emilio, it’s alright.” Will raises his hand slowly, open palm facing him. He folds his fingers to make a loose fist, ignoring the bolt of pain that runs through each one as he flexes it. “Watch my hand - focus on it alone the best you can - and match your breathing to it. In and out when I open and close my fist, alright?”

It hurts, opening and closing his hand, letting the fabric that lines the inside of his gloves pull at his broken finger nails and rub at the abrasions on his skin, but it helps Emilio.

But when he finally has the breath to speak, Emilio says, “Why do you keep doing this to me?”

“I have your sweater,” Will says, holding it up as though Emilio might reach out and take it, despite his cuffed hands. “I saw that your name is stitched on the tag. Your mom made you this, huh?”

A new wave of stymied anger and terror battle each other across the territory of Emilio’s face, and Will realizes that he believes his family is being threatened.

“I was going to leave you be - I am going to leave you be, in just a few more minutes, don’t worry about that - but I kept thinking about you putting this sweater over my shoulders and I felt like… I wouldn’t be doing right if I left without telling you how much that meant to me - without thanking you properly.”

“You already said thank you. You don’t - you don’t have to…”

“I do, though. I do,” Will says, his voice soft but fervent. He thinks, really, that if he doesn’t explain now he will die with the words still imprisoned inside of himself.

He can, he tells himself, say it to Emilio, because though they have gotten to know each other so quickly Will can be confident that he will never have to look him in the eyes again after he

and Hannibal leave for good, and because he has control over Emilio still, and because in deciding to spare his life Will has in a sense taken responsibility for - ownership of - that life.

Mostly, though, it is because of the sweater.

“When my father used me,” Will begins, pausing to swallow around the lump in his throat. “When he raped me… there wasn’t anyone.

“There wasn’t anyone to do me a kindness like you did last night. My mother was dead by then.” He remembers wondering, at the time, if his father chose to turn his attentions to Will because she was no longer around to use. He’d wondered, too, if his own conception was accompanied by similar violence and violation, and if that was why what affection she had for him seemed so fraught with distaste - he has not, in fact, ever stopped wondering if that might have been the case. “And I didn’t dare tell the servants or anyone else, because I thought if I did the same thing would happen to them that happened to my mother, and maybe I would just disappear too. If there were adults who knew what was going on behind closed doors in that hideous old house, none of them dared to let on - at least not in my company.”

Will stops, studying Emilio’s expression; his face is carefully neutral, hiding whatever true feelings lay behind it from fear that they will not be the reaction that Will is hoping for.

He supposes it’s unfair of him, putting this additional burden on the guy, but now that the gates are open Will feels incapable of stopping until he has explained himself the best that he can.

“I’m not trying to claim, you know, that I’m the way that I am because of what happened to me. The same shit happens to more kids than you could count - maybe hundreds of thousands, every year, in the US alone - and only a handful of them grow up to be anything like me. It’s not a reason, or an explanation, or anything like an excuse.

“So that’s not what I’m trying to say, and I’m not looking for your sympathy or anything of that nature. And Christ knows what Scott did to me wasn’t all that he wanted to do and wasn’t anywhere near as bad as what my father -

“I know that I don’t really deserve kindness. Despite,” he adds, the ghost of a wistful smile paying on his lips, “having found someone who can love me despite - maybe even because of - what I am.

“I know that I am… a poisonous thing. Spiteful. Cruel. A murderer. But back then, I was still a child.” Will tries, with very little success, to run his aching fingers through his blood-matted hair. He lets his hands fall back to his sides. “I was a child,” he says again, as though to remind himself.

“What I’m saying is that when it happened, when my father did that to me, I was by myself with it. But you didn’t leave me to suffer on my own. You took a risk to stop Scott from hurting me more and you gave me your sweater.

“So I wanted to thank you for your compassion. That’s all.”

Will straightens. “I’ll leave you be now. Here’s one last thing, though - you can sell this story. Get paid - hell, I don’t care. I won’t be angry about it and I won’t look to find you.

“Just… not this part of it, alright? You say whatever you want about me bringing your sweater back, but I’d rather you leave the rest of what I just told you out of it. And don’t repeat the ugly stuff I said about Hannibal when I was trying to scare you, okay? I don’t want anyone thinking that I think about him like that.

“And don’t, for God’s sake, tell anyone that you let me go. You’ll catch an accessory murder charge or three if you aren’t careful about that.” Will pauses, wondering if there is anything else. He adds, “I’d view it as a personal favor if you didn’t work with Freddie Lounds.

“Last thing - get yourself into therapy. The aftermath of this entire mess is going to be hard on you, once you get a chance to really start to process it, but if you can find someone to help you get out in front of it that will be make a big difference.”

Graham turns, and goes, and after that Emilio never sees him again, except in the pictures that materialize during the media frenzy that grips his life in the weeks following his discovery, about thirty-eight hours from now, in the small factory turned charnel house.

Emilio sees Graham in his dreams, sometimes, too. Sometimes Graham is only a malicious force, leaning over Emilio as he hurts him, but more often he holds the role of a slightly wicked Jiminy Cricket figure, steering Emilio - guiding him to make the best use of the life in the end he’d allowed Emilio to keep, after offering it to him and then jerking it out of reach again and again.

These dreams, (of which the real Will Graham knows absolutely nothing of at all), usually tender good advice, if only because they are in actuality the voice of Emilio’s unencumbered subconscious, and before very long Emilio comes to trust the instruction they supply.

He has problems, some of which will linger for the rest of his life; insomnia and night terrors, when the dreams are not kind to him; an abiding fear of needles, and of any form of restraints, and of walking alone on city sidewalks that remind him in any way at all of the street on which he and his late colleagues snatched up Graham, as though he might expect one day to be repaid in the same manner.

There is always, in the back of Emilio’s mind, the possibility that Graham or else Lecter might someday come for him, though to what purpose Emilio does not know. As the decades go by and nothing more is heard of the two long standing fugitives - even when Emilio is an old man and it seems increasingly likely that Lecter at least must be long dead of old age, if not some accident - the sense the he is being watched, or perhaps watched over, never really leaves him.

After a time, that feeling becomes something of a comfort.

Emilio is, all things considered, just fine.

Will and Hannibal find a small clinic halfway between the factory and the private airstripe that Margot has directed them to, and quietly they break in.

The door to the medical supply room is a harder nut to crack, but when Will asks to be let in Hannibal makes it happen.

“What are you looking for?” he asks Will, when he begins, with stiff hands, to browse through the medications in the supply closet.

“Um,” Will says, just embarrassed enough to duck his head away from Hannibal’s searching eyes. “I should probably be on a PEP regimen, is the thing.”

He hopes that will go over Hannibal’s head, but of course it doesn’t - the man was in his sexual prime during the AIDS crisis. Hannibal keeps track of such things. He says carefully, “Did Melo say something that gave you reason to believe that was a concern…”

“No,” Will says. “Nothing at all like that. I just want to be safe, is all.”

Hannibal crowds in next to him in front of the cabinet, and Will steps back to let him take over. “You’re looking for zidovudine and either lamivudine or emtricitabine,” he says. “I should have a hepatitis b booster while we’re at it.”

Hannibal nods, sorting through the drug samples and the bottles and vials, and since his back is to Will it’s much easier to say, “I hadn’t ever done anything like that before, you know.” Hannibal nods again.

Will pauses to think about the thing again, which is by now a fading red blur in his memory, of all the biting and the tearing at flesh with his fingers and his teeth; he’d gone a little crazy with it, but that didn’t mean he hadn’t been in control of his actions.

I ate him alive, he thinks, the connection settling into place for the first time, with all the power of a religious revelation, and if he expects his stomach to turn over at the thought, it does not.

“I won’t say that it wasn’t satisfying,” Will continues, “but it was a foolish thing to do.”

“You usually mediate violence through tools,” Hannibal says, and it is not a question. He takes a bottle from the supply cabinet and sits it on the counter before returning to the hunt. “I imagine it helps to maintain a degree of emotional distance.”

“I suppose that’s true,” Will agrees. “But I think it’s more like… You know how when you deny yourself some aspect of a thing, even when that thing is an indulgence that you know you shouldn’t be partaking in, that allows you to prove to yourself that you have control over it? I guess that’s why I’ve never, um, used my hands like that before.”

“Do you think that you will do it again?”

Hannibal's back is still to him, and Will studies the set of his shoulders carefully, trying to decide what answer he is hoping for.

"No," Will says, wondering if it's the truth - if he will be able to stop himself, now that that gate has been open. "Not to that… degree, anyway."

"Here we are," Hannibal says, lifting another bottle from the cabinet. He turns, only briefly, to glance at Will, before turning to the sink. "Why don't you go sit on the exam table? I'll be there in a moment."

Will walks to the exam room and climbs painfully up onto the table and begins to work his gloves off. They stick to the dry blood, and getting them off is difficult.

The hands beneath are a mess in all the usual ways and then some. He'd gotten a bit too overzealous and pulled a couple of his nails back when - well, he can't remember exactly when. His jaw aches, and the busted tooth is a hornet sting inside his mouth.

"Shoulda seen the other guy," Will mumbles to himself.

His clothing is a filthy, bloody mess, and not all of that blood is other people's. Hannibal leans over him, scalpel in hand, and cuts the ruined t-shirt down the back to save Will the trouble of trying to shrug it off.

"You like it when I'm helpless," Will accuses, but without any fire.

"I like being allowed to care for you," Hannibal answers.

"It's rotten work."

"Not to me. Not when it's you."

He has a warm washcloth in hand, and he leans over Will and begins to clean the filth away from his skin. The bruises emerge from beneath the dull rust of dry blood are vibrant and bright. "The plane will be waiting for us in about two hours," he tells Will.

Will closes his eyes and leans back into Hannibal's touch as gently he washes his back clean. "We'd be sunk if not for Margot. More times than I care to count. She's put a lot on the line."

"What are you planning for Cordell?" Hannibal asks, turning back to the sink to rinse the rag.

"Dunno. Whatever's best for Margot, is the main thing. That's what's important." He pauses, humming, as Hannibal begins to scrub his shoulders. "Christ, that feels so good," Will breathes.

They are quiet for a few minutes, and Will feels on the verge of drifting off. As much to keep himself awake as for any other reason, he says, "I'll tell you something funny - I think I'm just about murdered out, for the time being anyway. I ought to be chomping at the bit to get a chance at Cordell, given everything that's happened, but it just feels like a heavy piece of work that needs doing."

“Shall we eat him?” Hannibal says.

“I dunno,” Will says again. “Depends on a lot of things, I guess - how it all plays out. He pauses, craning his head on his stiff neck to watch Hannibal’s face. “Would you like to?”

Hannibal doesn’t answer. He has put the rag in the sink, and is currently undoing Will’s fly, but in a chaste, almost professional way. Will plants his feet on the footrest and lifts his hips so Hannibal can draw his jeans off.

Will is a little hard, inside his boxers, but there’s no urgency to the feeling. He is still while Hannibal washes his stomach, the tops of his thighs and his lower legs.

“Can you turn over to lay on your stomach?”

“Take my wrists and help me,” Will says, and Hannibal does. Will rests his head in the cradle of his folded arms.

When Hannibal bends over him to clean the backs of his thighs with the warm wet rag, parting his legs slightly as he works, Will knows that he is look for a particular bruise pattern on the inside of his thighs, and for blood… or other things… on the inside of his boxers.

“You don’t think I’d tell you?” Will asks, without lifting his head.

“Would you?”

“It didn't go that far,” Will says, and tells Hannibal what happened. He uses short, detached sentences that describe a series of actions rather than his emotional state during those events, but he does tell Hannibal.

And he thinks, *Someday soon I will tell him everything that happened to me.* He knows that he can do this, and Hannibal will not demean him with pity, and his own disgust at having been used will not turn him poisonous against Hannibal.

But now is not the time for mourning his own lost child’s innocence, if ever he had been in possession of such a thing. Others are looking to him for strength now, and that puts steel in his spine, despite everything.

Lifting himself up on his elbows, Will sits back up and takes the clean clothing that Hannibal offers him.

Chapter 27

The small lake house is one of the places where Mason used to go to play, and Margot doesn't like being alone inside it.

Instead, she waits outside for Will and Hannibal to arrive, sitting outside for hours and watching the moon make her slow progress across the night sky.

She's stiff when she stands to greet the car as it pulls into the drive, the night's chill deep in her bones.

They make a frightening picture, the two of them, approaching her through the shadows - especially Hannibal, whose eyes are like dark, hollow pits.

They are coming, she knows, with the intent to kill, and that anticipation is blatant in their bodies and in their movements.

Margot wonders how they will take disappointment.

When Will passes under the halo of the porch light, Margot sees his face. The gasp escapes her lips before she can stop it.

Will's smile is pained, and not only in the emotional sense - the smile causes him pain, she can tell, but he still smiles for her.

"Am I very ugly?" he says.

His skin is a mottle of livid bruises. Both eyes have been blackened, and the one on the left is nearly swollen shut. There's cuts and abrasions, too, though the worse of the latter have been hidden behind band aids and bandages.

There's no reason that she can think of to delay filling them in on the situation. "Cordell is already dead," she says calmly. She feels quite calm, really.

The shutters close down around both men's faces at the same time, masking their reactions, and her anger surfaces then. *Bastards,* she thinks, knowing the thought is more sharp than deserved but feeling outrage at being shut out.

"I don't know what to do about the body," she goes on.

"We can take care of that for you, Margot," Will says quickly, maneuvering for control of the situation. The easiest thing to do now would be to stand down and let Will shepherd her through everything, to comfort him with her own weakness and need, but Margot doesn't want to do that.

Hannibal says, "What happened?"

"Come inside," Margot tells them.

In the house there is a smell, though neither Margot nor Will seem sensitive to it. It doesn't exactly bother Hannibal, but he notes quietly that they will not, whatever else happens here, be eating any part of Cordell; the meat has gone over.

They sit at the kitchen table while Margot, insistent, makes them all drinks.

Hannibal thinks for a moment that Will might demur when she puts the double shot of bourbon in front of him, but his compulsions win out and he takes it, drawing the glass towards him like a child might reach for a comfort toy.

"A professional hitman or one of the hired men?" Will asks. "Are you certain that he's reliable? Discreet?" When no one else speaks Will adds, in anxious confusion, "I don't want you to get into anymore trouble on our account, Margot."

It's astonishing, sometimes, Hannibal reflects, the blind spots Will can have in regards to the people whom he loves.

"She killed him herself, Will," Hannibal says. Margot looks toward him and nods, once, in confirmation.

"Margot?" Will asks, astounded. His face cannot decide what it wants to do; he would like to be pleased, Hannibal thinks, but he is ashamed by that impulse towards pleasure. "But what happened?"

And, on the tail of that, in a rush; "Are you alright? Did he hurt you?"

Margot doesn't answer, at least not directly. "He might not have been as bad as Mason, maybe, but he covered up for Mason. He made it possible for Mason to get away with so much of what he got away with, and he liked the work."

Hannibal wonders if Margot is aware that something similar might be said of her - that she has enabled every murder, deserving or not, that he and Will have committed or will commit since she took Beth into her care and set them out onto the road with an untraceable car and plenty of cash, but he doesn't ask. He knows that she must know.

"The idea of him being dead didn't bother me - you were right, Will, it was past time, and I don't believe that I would have minded if the two of you made him suffer first… but it was the waiting. My knowing that death was coming for him, and Cordell's knowing that too, and his knowing that I knew. I was having some trouble with that. Making him sit in his chains and wait for hours and hours, knowing that he was going to die. Does that make sense?"

Inflicting that kind of knowing, Hannibal understands, is for Will in many ways more important - more enjoyable - than the act of violence itself, but Will is nodding as though he understands exactly what she means, so Hannibal nods along too.

"I kept going in to look at him," she goes on. "I was thinking a lot about what you had said, Will, about how it would have been therapeutic for me to kill Mason myself, and about how

Cordell was the closest shot I might ever get at that. I wasn't -"

Margot closes her eyes. "He was sullen for a while. Quiet - or maybe too scared to talk, I don't know.

"Eventually, he started wheedling."

Quietly, Will asks, "What did he say?"

"He said something hideous about you, Will, a lie that he wouldn't have imagined telling if he hasn't already thought about it himself. He tried to leverage my trauma to poison me against you."

"Tell me what he said."

"He said, 'You should get rid of them before they decide to get rid of you. Haven't you seen the way Graham looks at your boy? He'll kill you to take Tommy away for himself. He's *hungry* for that boy.'"

Will puts his empty glass down on the table. It makes a small sound.

"I was debating what to do when I entered the room in which he was being held. When he said that to me I made up my mind, and I raised the gun and I shot him."

"I see," Will says. His hands are shaking, quite badly.

If he were to try to touch Will now, Hannibal thinks, Will might hurt him quite badly, or else injure himself trying to escape that touch. It would probably be okay if Margot were to touch him, but Hannibal would rather not chance it, and he watches her out of the corner of his eye to be certain that she does not try.

"Will," Margot says, "there is no part of me that believes any part of that."

There is a hitch in Will's throat, and his adam's apple bobs, sickly. "Excuse me," he says, and stands to walk quickly from the room.

Will turns the water on in the bathroom sink, but it's a small house and the walls are thin, and Hannibal and Margot both can hear what is happening.

"You might have spared him by keeping that to yourself," Hannibal says, his voice low.

"You know better than that," Margot says, unrepentant. "If I tried to lie he would have known, and he would have ferreted out the truth eventually, and he'd take the omission as evidence that on some level I believed what Cordell said about him. This was better."

Will comes back perhaps five minutes later. "Sorry about that," he says briskly, standing in the threshold. "I'm on a new medication, and I'm afraid that nausea and vomiting are common side effects."

Will mimes slapping his hands together, as though eager to begin a piece of work. “There’s a body to get rid of, isn’t there?”

Chapter 28

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Margot unlocks the door and leaves them alone, and Will waits until she's disappeared down the stairs to open it and go inside.

It's a child's guest room, after a fashion, with a child's bed and child-sized furnishings. It is, Will knows, a place where children were hurt, and the air around him is painted still with screams and baffled sobbing.

Hannibal's nose wrinkles with disgust when he follows Will into the room, and Will wonders if he can sense it, too, all that fear and pain ground into the plush carpet and colorful wallpaper like an indelible stain. But maybe Hannibal is only putting the pieces together rationally, which would not be hard to do, or else responding to the corpse stink.

Will tries not to look around too much. He focuses on the still mass in the corner, slumped against the slide of the dresser.

"Here's a chance for you to exercise your expertise," Will says, after Hannibal steps forward and draws the blanket that Margot covered it with, stiff with brown blood, off the body. "Tell me what you see. How'd it play out?"
Hannibal crouches in front of the body, which is handcuffed by the wrist to the leg of the dresser, which is bolted to the floor, Will supposes, to keep Mason's guests from trying to use it to barricade the door.

"I don't love the way Margot's hired men left him cuffed," Will says, while Hannibal is unbuttoning Cordell's shirt to get a look at the bullet wound. "If he'd had the guts and the physical strength for it, all he'd've had to do to get free was dislocate his thumb."

Hannibal doesn't look away from his task. "Most people aren't capable of harming themselves in that way, even when it's a life or death situation."

"You could, I bet, if you had to."

"As could you," Hannibal says, and Will feels a flush of pride at that, though he isn't entirely sure that it is the truth.

"Margot shot him from a few yards off, just as she said," Hannibal tells him. "A smaller caliber weapon than I might have expected her to carry, but it did the trick eventually."

Will perks up at that. "How do you mean?"

"The bleeding on its own would have been severe enough to kill him, given enough time." Will nods at that; he has a solid idea, after all, of how much blood a body and lose before

giving up the ghost, and what has dried on Cordell's clothing and pooled in sticky clots on the ground around him seems more than enough.

"But look at the placement of the entry wound," Hannibal goes on, and points, without touching the dead pallid flesh, at the red hole on the right side of Cordell's chest. "That will have deflated the right lung, almost certainly, but there's more to it than that or the bleeding.

"I imagine a sucking chest wound, one that might have produced an eerie kind of whistling, not from the mouth but from the wound itself. Every new breath would draw more air into the chest cavity, building up the pressure inside until the remaining functional lung collapsed."
"He suffered?"
"Oh yes."

"For how long, do you figure? Ten minutes - maybe fifteen?"

"Less than that," Hannibal says. But he adds, as a consolation, "It must have been terrifying for him, to say nothing of the pain. Every breath he drew in granting him less than half of the air he needed, while at the same time increasing the weight pressing against his remaining lung until it caved in on itself. And then nothing, until unconsciousness - he could open his mouth and suck in air, but it made no difference, whatsoever."

"What do you think Margot was doing, while he was busy dying, do you figure?"

"I can't say with any certainty. You know her better than I do."

"I'm just asking for your best guess."

"Normal people dither," Hannibal says, "while they are waiting for someone whom they have killed to finish dying. They see the reality of the terrible harm that they have done, and even if they set out calmly and with all calculation to do murder, when they see that it isn't as neat and easy as movies make it look they become disgusted by the sounds and smells and mess, horrified by the appearance of the wound or by the convulsions or any of the other unpredictable things that a body in fatal distress might do. They can barely stand it, and don't know what to do - how to help, how to make it stop, to make them stop with the ugly work of dying and just be still and dead. It's hard for them, and they are panicked into inaction."

He pauses. "Others gloat."

"There's some gloating in Margot, but not much. And she's good at keeping her head, even when she's scared, but sometimes she freezes up. That happened here, don't you think? She'd have shot him again, if she hadn't froze up." Will pauses, trying to see. "Either that, or she turned and left as soon as she shot him - maybe didn't come back for a while, and by then he'd have been good and dead.

"I hope that's how it happened. That would have been the best way for her." He sighs, wistfully. "I wish, if she was going to do it, that I'd been here to walk her through it. This might fester still."

Hannibal is laying his supplies out on the floor; the extra large garbage bags and plastic sheeting, the utility knife to cut out the stain carpet and the cleaning supplies to scrub down the floorboards beneath it. He says, “This is never going to be clean enough to deceive a really determined forensic investigator - not one that’s good at their job, the way Bev is, anyway - if they ever have cause to look for Cordell here. And our fingerprints and DNA are everywhere by now, along with Margot’s.”

“I don’t know why they’d look. Mason held the property under a false name. I imagine Margot might arrange for a house fire, though.” Will is exhausted down to his very bones, and would like to sit while Hannibal works, but the only piece of furniture big enough for him in the room is the bed, and he has no intention on going anywhere near that. “Be a relief to know a place like this has gone up in smoke.

“She’ll tell me,” Will adds, with only a ghost of uncertainty, “how it happened. When she’s ready. And I’ll listen, and that’ll help with it.”

Hannibal makes a sound of agreement, low in his throat, and rolls Cordell onto the plastic sheeting. He is quiet for a few minutes, then he says, “I don’t imagine that I can convince you to stay here and rest while I get rid of this?”

“Nope,” Will says, with considerably more pep than he really feels.

“Will you at least go sit somewhere until I’m ready to leave? You’re dead on your feet, Will.”

“Alright,” Will concedes, because it is all too true. It’s nice, he reflects as he heads down the stairs, how little it grates on him these days to have someone else show him concern, at least as long as that person is Hannibal.

Chapter End Notes

I'm a bit worried that this one is a little slow, but I've been struggling with it for a week now and I'm tired of fussing with it. : /

Next one is going to be longer, and ought to transition us to the concluding story arc for this series. How about that, can you believe it?

Chapter 29

Hannibal had half considered the possibility of slipping away to get rid of the body by himself, but Will is too good at predicting him for that; when Hannibal hauls his burden out to the garage to load it in the back of the SUV, he finds Will already waiting for him, curled up in the front passenger seat.

He's asleep, Hannibal sees when he climbs in behind the wheel, and in the SUV's bucket seats he looks small, nearly child-like, his head lolling against the tinted window.

Hannibal believes that Will was telling the truth when he said that he does not remind Will of his father - or, at least, Hannibal believes that Will really believes that is the truth - but Hannibal wonders sometimes; if the age gap between the two of them was not so large, or if he was built closer to Will's own size, would Will have had the same degree of difficulty coming to accept his touch? Would sex, even still, remain so fraught with the potential for panic and panicked violence?

And Hannibal wonders, as well, if Will is conscious of how often he offers sex as a means of pacifying him when he believes that Hannibal is angry with him - how often it feels as though it is not something that Will wants to do for its own sake, but rather a plea to not be hated or abandoned. Hannibal has gotten good at diverting these offers, when they are coming from a bad place, and in any case it happens much less often these days, but it still weighs on him.

He thinks now that he should try again to convince Will to stay behind - perhap try a different angle by suggesting that Margot could use him near at hand - but Hannibal doesn't want to. It's selfish, he supposes, but he wants Will close to him now, regardless of how badly he needs rest.

Will begins to stir when they pull out onto the road, but he doesn't look at Hannibal. He looks out the window, instead, though he can't be able to see much; it is dark out, and this early in the spring the other lake houses are all dark and quiet.

"You know that, um, cycle of abuse thing?" Will says, as the shadows bathe his bruised face. "You know, the idea that someone who was beaten, or sexually assaulted, or abused emotionally, or whatever, is more likely to repeat that behavior when they are adults? It's a myth. The bit about molestation is especially bullshit. It's basically built around the results of one major study, from the 1980s, which applied entirely fucked data collection methods. The media loves to misreport on it, though, to this day.

"Everyone was so into that idea when I was in grad school, though, you know, the cycle of abuse thing. They'd look a kid who'd been having his ass handed to him by his father his entire life, or a kid who'd been raped, kids who thought their names were curse words because they'd never been called anything else, and act like their lives were already ruined and everything was set in stone.

“And you’d have to bite your own tongue or you’d be suspect, too, you couldn’t tell them what you went through or how it felt to have it taken as a given that you would end up being fucked up in just the same way as the people who fucked you up…”

Will pauses, and Hannibal thinks perhaps he will begin to talk about what happened to him now, but instead he says with bitter and almost desperate humor, “Joke’s on them - I broke the mould. I’m fucked up in my own entirely unique way.”

It will not help now for Hannibal to argue with Will about himself, and he doesn’t try. He listens instead, hoping for more direct openness.

Instead Will deflects from himself, like he does so often, by expressing outrage on behalf of others. “I’ve had so many patients who were so fucked up by that idea, you know? People who would never dream of harming a child - who have absolutely no desire or inclination towards hurting children in any way - but who feel like they’ve been pumped full of poison. Like they’re so covered in filth that won’t wash off, and are terrified that they will dirty anyone who comes too close.

“I used to be able to say, ‘Look at me - my dad used to beat the shit out of me on a bi-weekly basis, and I’m normal, I’m doing well, I’m successful and happy and a pillar of the community.’” Will swallows. “I wouldn’t tell them about the rest of it, but I’d talk about the old man threatening me and my mother and using his fists on us, when it helped for patients to know that about me, so I could say, ‘That happened to me but I’ve got my shit together now, I’m not ruined and you don’t have to be either.’ It didn’t matter if I was lying, because they believed me and believing it helped to make it true for them.”

Careful now, Hannibal thinks to himself, and says, “I was never harmed by an adult towards whom I had an expectation of caring - my parents, my caretakers, they were good people. But it helped me a great deal, early in our sessions, when I was still invested in… behaving as though I were normal, to be allowed to see small glimpses of the ways in which you were strange in a way that was similar to the ways in which I knew myself to be strange, knowing also how respected and well-liked you were. At the time, of course, I thought you only had a small spark of what was inside me, but the fact that you were accepted by others - and accepted me - made an immense difference in how I thought about myself.”

“I know it,” Will says, with a certain degree of pride. “I was doing really well by you, for a while there.”

Then Will frowns. “That’s why you were so disappointed with me - so angry, when you found out the truth. I didn’t just threaten your life, I snatched away all the new-found faith you’d built in yourself - the idea that you were okay the way you were and could go on being okay, and be happy with that.”

“Yes,” Hannibal concedes. “But I know myself better than I did back then, and that’s more than worth the exchange. And I like the person you really are more than who you pretended to be.”

Will falls silent, embarrassed and full of doubts, even now, but trying to believe.

When he's given Will enough time with his thoughts, Hannibal says, "Neither Margot nor I believe what Cordell said about you, you know."

"But how can you know for sure, either of you? He was lying to try to save his own skin, but Margot must have her doubts. No one ever really knows anyone else, she can't be sure, there must be some part of her that wonders if I'm a threat to her or Tommy, that wonders if I'm safe -"

"We know you, Will," Hannibal tells him. "We know who you are."

Will falls silent, but Hannibal thinks some of the tension has gone out of him.

When they turn off onto the logging road, Will rouses from the doze he'd fallen into. He feels no better rested than he was before he drifted off, and he looks at Hannibal's face in profile and then out the windows at the shadow-soaked trees, trying to decide how long he'd been asleep.

Hannibal makes a perfunctory effort to convince Will to wait in the SUV while he attends to matters, but Will refuses, as Hannibal surely knew he would.

He's in no condition to help move the body, but he tucks an electric lantern under one arm and with his other hand works the flashlight, and follows Hannibal into the brush. When they come to a likely-looking clearing, about a mile from where they left the SUV, Hannibal lowers the plastic-wrapped body to the ground.

Taking the flashlight, Hannibal heads back to the SUV to get the rest of his supplies, and Will turns on the lantern and finds a good tree to settle down under while Hannibal works.

He returns a little while later with the first of the bags of charcoal and the shovel and sharp-bladed hoe, and sets to digging a shallow pit, before he unwraps the body and begins to dismember it.

It's ugly work, and Will can't pretend that it isn't, but there's something pleasantly reassuring about watching Hannibal at it; the confidence and lack of hesitation. There's an easy kind of ruggedness to it, and Will does not usually associate Hannibal with that particular type of masculinity.

Hannibal puts the pieces into the pit on top of the bed of hot charcoal, and heaps the coals around them so they will burn more quickly. They are at least twenty miles from the nearest human habitation, and it is doubtful that this early in the season there will be anyone else in the woods with them, and even if the smoke is noted they will be taken for over enthusiastic campers.

Hannibal feeds wood and more charcoal to the fire for hours. For a while, the smell makes Will hungry, though he knows that the meat was left out too long to be safe to eat, and the warmth of the fire is comforting. Will dozes, and then he sleeps.

He wakes well after dawn, and finds Hannibal's jacket is draped over him - the brown one that Hannibal took from Will's closet just before they fled Baltimore. Will is cold and stiff despite the jacket, and he stretches and looks around, blinking sleep from his eyes.

Will sees that Hannibal is shifting through the ashes with the shovel, fishing out the skull and femurs and the other easily identifiable large bones that haven't burned away. These have been made brittle by the heat, and Hannibal lays them on top of a flat rock and crushes them with a sledgehammer.

Carefully, then, he picks up all of the pieces and carries them to the deep hole that he has dug beside the fire pit and drops them inside. He shovels the hot ashes and the rest of the bones into the hole as well, and then he fills the fire pit and the grave in with earth.

When he is done he comes and sits on the ground beside Will, leaning against him, shoulder shoulder, his legs drawn up to his chest, lanky arms dangling over the sharp peaks of his knees.

He's looking thin again, Will thinks to himself. *I'll need to keep an eye on that.*

Will leans his head into the crook of Hannibal's neck. He smells of wood smoke and charred meat and sweat, and his skin is grey with soot. Will breathes the scent in, then he places a sucking kiss against Hannibal's skin, tasting, feeling under his lips and tongue the network of scars that he's left there.

"Love you," Will mutters against his skin, and presses his forehead harder against Hannibal's shoulder. "Love you so much."

Hannibal's hand comes up, strong nimble fingers carding through the knots in his lank, greasy hair gently. "I'm dirty," Will complains, "I need a shower." But Hannibal doesn't stop touching him, and Will is glad of that.

Without knowing why he says it, Will tells Hannibal, "I used to worry, you know, when you were first coming around and staying the night at my place, that some morning I'd wake up feeling ugly, and whatever it was that I was starting to feel for you would just be gone, and I'd kill you for spite. Kept me up at night, that idea."

Will lifts his head in time to see the ghost of a smile twitch at the edge of Hannibal's lips, but he hides it away quickly. "Aside from your father," he says, "I don't believe that you've ever killed someone with whom you had more than a passing acquaintanceship, let alone cared about."

Will frowns unhappily, knowing himself to be caught. "Mason," he says, defensively, after a moment's thought.

"You didn't kill Mason. You passed him off to me. Less than thirty-six hours in Melo's company and you tried to do the same with him, when you thought he needed to be killed."

"His name is Emilio," Will says, resigned to accept Hannibal's assessment. "I wonder if he's been found yet."

For a while, Will listens to the wild bird song that surrounds them, and to the sound of Hannibal's steady breathing. "I would have been curious to kill Cordell. Better that Margot did it, though - that will be good for her, eventually, once she has some distance on it."

Hannibal is quiet for so long that Will starts to believe that he has nothing to say to that, but then he he says, "Margot is dependent upon you now, to a degree that she has never been before. Aside from myself, there is no one else in the world with whom she can discuss the things inside her head, and she will need help talking through them."

Will watches him carefully, eyes narrowed.

Hannibal says, "You can't abandon her now, no more than she could do without you."

"Did you encourage her to kill Cordell?" Will asks evenly, feeling his heart kick up in his chest.

Calmly, Hannibal says, "Not in any way that she noticed."

Will sees it now; there will be no noble separation, no denial of the love that he has for Margot and their son in the interest of their own good. Not now.

Will reaches for the anger that he is certain he should be feeling, but all he can find is gratitude, and he buries his face against Hannibal's shoulder again, feeling the wetness of tears that he cannot fight back.

Hannibal's hand comes up again and cradles the back of his head as he cries, silently, out of relief, and Will is grateful for that, too.

Chapter 30

Will means to take charge of things, when he gets back to the lake house.

He intends to have a serious conversation with Margot - to feel out how she feels and what she needs from him now, what effect having killed is having on her, and what they will do, going forward, about Tommy and everything else.

Ways to make everything work out okay.

Instead, he falls into bed and sleeps for about fourteen hours.

He's alone in the bed when he wakes up, his body a stiff bundle of raw nerves, and in the time that it takes him to remember where he is there is a long terrified moment in which he is certain that Hannibal has been taken from him again, or else he from Hannibal.

But when he sits up he sees Margot in a chair by the foot of the bed, watching him.

She's seen his fear, and Will is embarrassed by that, but he tries to keep a leash on the feeling. He thinks, maybe, that it would be easier for him to be less afraid if he were able to admit to being afraid more often, if only to the people he loves.

"Hannibal's making dinner for us," Margot tells him, knowing, of course, what Will's afraid of.

He needs to pee like mad, and he gets out of bed and takes care of himself, then sits back down on the edge of the mattress. Margot has a bottle of water and a couple of percocets, and when she brings them to him Will takes them gratefully, swallowing the pills and then most of the water, before sitting the bottle on the bedside table.

Margot sits down next to him on the bed, puts her shoulder against his and cups his hand inside both of hers, careful not to hurt him.

He knows how much it means, that she is willing to touch him. That touching him doesn't frighten her. He knows.

"It's going to get hot again, once they connect you two back to those bounty hunters."
"I know it."

"How bad is it going to be?"

"Bad," Will allows. "We got rough with a couple of them - I especially got rough."

Margot doesn't say anything, and when Will hurries to fill the gap he is pleased by how reasonable he is able to keep his own tone.

"You wouldn't like what I did, Margot, and you won't think that it was a right thing to do. It will scare you, maybe quite badly - maybe worse than anything else you've learned about me.

But if I told you why, you'd understand it, even if you wouldn't want to."

He watches her. "I can tell you what happened - start to finish. That might be better than watching the media try to piece it together."

There's a regalness to Margot, when she is afraid but refuses to allow the fear to direct her, neither in thought nor deed. Will admires it more than he could ever say.

"You'll tell me everything that happened," she warns him, "but not right now. We'll talk about the details later."

Her measured calm is contagious. Will takes it in, and it comes as a tremendous relief. "Alright," he says, simply.

"The causality is what's complicated for me," Margot says. "I see what they did to you, how they badly they must have beaten you, and I think about how hard that must have been for you to take and how badly having you snatched away terrified Hannibal and I, and I am… not able to rally any empathy for those men. I'm not willing to try to do so, is what I mean."

And Will, who spent most of his formative years unable to control the powerful empathy he felt for every person and living thing around him, and who still regresses to that miserable condition when he is not careful says, "I understand what you mean."

"That's the first layer. But there's a part of my mind - or my conscience - that insists on reminding me that they were only on your trail because you killed those EMTs, who were only doing their jobs, to free Hannibal, but that Hannibal only needed rescuing because he killed Mason, and I can hardly fault either of you when I've benefited in more ways than I could count from having Mason out of my life, but then I also remember that the two of you probably never would have thought to kill Mason, and certainly wouldn't have gone through with it, if killing didn't come so easy to you - if you, Will, specifically, weren't so practiced at killing.

"But you and Hannibal are my family, and those people are strangers, and I can't give you up for their sake. That's selfish, isn't it?"
Will thinks for a few moments, stretching mental muscles that haven't gotten much use since he lost his practice. "You're wired to prioritize your own survival, and the survival of your loved ones, over that of outsiders. That's a common response to living a life surrounded by hostility and violence, that kind of siege mentality.

"It might not always be the best orientation to have towards the outside world," Will concedes, "but it's a testament to how strong you are, Margot, that you aren't so much worse."

"You mean that I'm not more like you."

Will inclines his head. "I let one of them go - one of the bounty hunters. He was good to me - or at least as good as he dared to be, given the situation." He tells her, with as much detachment as he can muster for a shield, about Scott and the plastic bag, and how Emilio put

a stop to it. “He didn’t pity me - I scared the living hell out of him - but he helped me anyway. He didn’t deserve…

“I’m not going to stop,” he tells her, as he has told Hannibal. “I won’t lie to you about that. But I am going to… try to avoid, in the future, killing anyone who hasn’t done something to really deserve it. Anyone I’d be really ashamed of you finding out that I killed him.

“I know that’s not much of a concession.” He shrugs, falls silent.

Margot says, “Where are you going after this?”

“Back to Brazil, but just for a little while, Margot, just until we take care of one last thing. We’ve got to - Hannibal needs it.”

“Is it about his sister?”

“Yes,” Will says, but volunteers no additional information - it’s for Hannibal to tell her, however much or little he wants to tell.

“And we’ll see you after that,” Margot tells him.

“Yeah,” he says, blinking quickly against the bite of tears. “Yes - Absolutely. If you want to.”

“Good.”

“I was thinking that if you had a yacht, it would be easy for us to sail out from wherever we were staying to meet you. There wouldn’t be much risk in that. And it would only have to be a couple of days a year, once - maybe twice - a year. A few days would be enough.”

“That’s another thing that we’ll talk about later, when you’re feeling better,” Margot says, and stands up. Will can tell, though, that Hannibal has gotten his way; it will not be a matter of whether Will can or should consider to visit Margot and their son, but rather how to manage the logistics of the matter - the best way for them to see each other, as often as possible, without risking capture or emotional harm to Tommy.

Margot finds Hannibal in the kitchen, where she left him.

“I don’t think he’s ready to get out of bed,” she tells him.

Hannibal glances away from the stove long enough to give her a quick, assessing look. The oil in the pan pops and hisses when he uses the tongs to turn the fried chicken. On another burner, collard greens simmer in a rich cream sauce.

“I’ll take a plate up to him when it’s done.”

“That’s Will’s recipe,” Margot notes. “He makes it when he wants comfort, or when he thinks someone else needs it.”

Hannibal makes a small sound in agreement.

“Is he alright?” Margot asks.

“That’s a broad question,” Hannibal says carefully. “I might ask you to tell me instead. You’ve known him much longer than I have. Do you think he’s keeping afloat?”

“Deflection in the form of flattery,” she says. “Did you pick that up from Will, too?”

His back still to her, Hannibal shrugs.

“You’ve been inside the veil with him. I only catch glimpses of what’s going on behind his eyes.”

“Killing stabilizes him, and we did a lot of killing. He’s much calmer about everything that happened to him than I might have dared to hope.”

“Those men might still be alive if I hadn’t helped the two of you elude punishment,” Margot says, simply to see how he will take it.

Hannibal turns to face her. “Are you worried about your own moral culpability?” he asks.

“Not enough to do anything about it,” Margot says, coming closer to the truth at the heart of the matter than she did with Will. “But yes. Don’t you ever worry about that?”

“Not especially,” Hannibal admits. “Insofar as I’ve had or continue to have concerns about what Will does, these are practical.”

“You didn’t worry about hurting people. You worried about getting caught.”

“Yes,” Hannibal agrees, after a small pause.

“But if you need to make an accounting, Will left one of them alive. That has more to do with your own influence than anything else, I imagine.”

“He told me.”

“That makes two that you’ve saved, by merit of being a good friend to him.”

Margot doesn’t think that it works that way, but she would like to believe that it can.

“What about you - are you okay?”

“I don’t think that I am, really,” Hannibal tells her, with the strangely earnest honesty that he sometimes reveals.

“The knowledge that Will had been taken from me by strangers, and that I had no control over what they might do to him - that I was powerless to protect him. That came with associations which for me were difficult.”

He's quiet for a long moment, and there is a slight slackness in his face and a foggy distance in his eyes. When Margot touches his arm he flinches, startled, and then turns back to the stove.

"The biscuits are burning," he says, with a sudden flare of anger, and reaches for the oven mits. There is nothing, so far as Margot can tell by sight or scent, wrong with the biscuits, but she does not argue with him about it.

When Will is done eating, Hannibal takes the tray away and crawls into bed beside him.

Some of the buttons on Will's pajama top have come unbuttoned, and Hannibal brushes his fingertips against one of the colorful bruises that mar the skin over Will's collar bones, just above his heart.

"Mischa loved the color purple," he says.

"Will you tell me about her?"

"I was… so annoyed when she was born. She looked like one of the little pink baby squirrels that sometimes fell out of their nests, which was in the tree beside our house. I thought that there had been some error, a mixup that had resulted in our having received the incorrect infant."

"An active imagination."

"I was four, and there were certain gaps in my knowledge base," Hannibal says.

"I loved her without reservation."

"Of course," Will says, with a calm certainty. He settles his head against Hannibal's chest. "That's the way that you love."

There's a tightness in Hannibal's chest, and Will seems to sense that because he gives him some time before he says, "Tell me more."

There's little enough to tell, as young as she'd been when she was taken from him. Hannibal has forgotten nothing, though some of what he speaks of now has been locked away in the dark corners of his memory for decades.

He doesn't talk now of the bad times, trapped under a mountain of snow in the cabin, but of birthday parties and holidays. Walks in the woods with their parents, turning over river stones to find frogs and newts and other interesting wild things, picking wildflowers to weave into her hair, and of traveling to the city for the parade that commemorated the October Revolution, lifting her up onto his shoulders so she could see the soldiers and the marching band and all the dancers, reading her bedtime stories, and when that memory steers Hannibal back towards the bad times as he recalls that she had not been quite as quick to learn to read as he was, but that she was catching up quickly in the weeks before they set out for that fatal family vacation, Will guides him away from that topic and back to brighter days.

It adds up to far more words than Hannibal would have expected, what he has left of her. He's glad to know that, and to be able to share it all with Will.

Chapter 31

Chapter Notes

CW for brief discussion of CSA/rape in this chapter.

I've been feeling kinda, IDK, isolated/down about this fic lately, like I've alienated or lost my readership, which is difficult when so much emotional energy is going into these chapters, so comments/feedback is like, incredibly valued and appreciated...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The chartered jet hits another patch of turbulence and Will clamps his teeth together anxiously, invoking a new bolt of pain from the broken tooth.

“Don’t like flying?” Hannibal prompts. Will has no doubt that he’s noticed this during the two other flights that they have taken together, but in the past has exercised enough tact not to mention it.

Hannibal is uneasy now, though, and looking for a distraction.

“Would’ve thought you’d figured out by now, I’m a big bundle of neuroses masquerading as a person.”

The jet is Margot’s doing, as was the one that, briefly, returned them to the United States to take of the mess that Cordell left behind, and as always they are flying on her dime. They have some new false papers as well, and a considerable amount of cash to supplement Will’s accounts. It seemed pointless to try to argue in favor of his pride; he’s already so deep in the hole with her that he’d never be able to pay her back, even if he still had his practice.

Their seats are roomy and soft, and Will would like to sink back into the plush comfort and try to forget about his aching body and the fact that they are currently suspended 35,000 feet above the solid earth, but he cannot even consider relaxing when Hannibal is so anxious.

“You alright?” Will asks, and Hannibal gives an almost imperceptible shake of his head and continues to stare out the window. He fidgets.

After a few minutes, Hannibal stands and says, “I’m going to look around.”

He’s gone for several minutes - there is, apparently, much to explore in the private jet - and when he returns he tells Will, “There’s a hot tub.”

“Is there really?” Will asks. “Good lord. Even I think that’s excessive.”

“You want to go into it?”

Will leans forward and feels every bruise and strained muscle whimper in protest. “Desperately,” he tells Hannibal. “Lets both of us use it.”

Will hobbles after Hannibal to the lavish lounge near the end of the jet. He works on stripping down to his boxers while Hannibal takes the top off the hot tub and figures out how to turn the bubbles on.

Hannibal is a lot faster than Will, and even with these extra tasks he is able to finish undressing before him. Will watches Hannibal’s back as he climbs down into the hot water, the way the light gleams against the network of shiny scars that crisscross his shoulders and the back of his neck with the movement of skin over muscle over bone. The bone, Will thinks, far too visible; three days have passed since they left the bounty hunters behind, and even when he is doing the cooking himself Hannibal has barely eaten anything.

Seeing the tension in Hannibal’s shoulders causes Will’s own body to ache in a new way.

Hannibal helps Will down into the tub, and they both sit. The water stings against all of his varied cuts and scrapes, but it feels fantastic to his aching muscles.

Hannibal is aware of how Will is looking at him, and is clearly pleased by it, yet when Will reached out and tries with all the finesse that he can manage, to tug provocatively at the waist of Hannibal’s boxers, Hannibal catches him by the wrist and lifts his hand out of the water.

“You’re hurting yourself.”

“It’s fine, Hannibal,” Will says, trying to laugh it off. “Don’t worry about me.”

Hannibal lets go of his hand, but moves away from Will, shifting along the ledge of the hot tub to put distance between the two of them. “I want to talk to you about something,” he says.

Fear kicks up in Will’s chest, but it’s the wiser part of himself that speaks. “It’s about time for that, isn’t it?”

“I’m not angry at you,” Hannibal says.

“I know it,” Will says. And rationally, he does; the enemy inside of him has tried to make whatever is digging at Hannibal about himself - has insisted that Hannibal is unhappy with him for having allowed himself to be captured, or for what he did to the bounty hunters, or any other number of faults or sins, small and massive, real and imagined. But he knows, really, that that is all self-centered horse shit.

“I haven’t come down from thinking that I’d lost you for good. It’s going to take a while to get that out from under my skin.”

“I know it,” Will says again. “I was trying to distract you from that for a while.”

“That’s part of the thing we need to talk about. I don’t want you to think that you have to do that.”

It's hard not to get defensive. Will tries to make it sound like a joke when he says, "What makes you think that you've ever gotten me to do a single goddamned thing that I didn't want to do?" but knows he isn't very successful at it.

Hannibal ignores this. "I know that you have a complicated relationship to sex. I think I understand why." He pauses. "Is that something that you want to talk about now?"

Will had been nearly ready to do so, but now he accepts the opportunity for retreat. "No," he says. "Not now - someday, but not now. You already know anyway."

The way in which Hannibal inclines his head is almost imperceptible, but there is no mistaking the assent.

"I understand that it can be difficult for you to have sex with me, specifically. What I need you to understand is that you are under no obligation. You needn't try to pacify or distract me in that way. If you decided that you didn't want to have sex with me anymore, I wouldn't leave. I wouldn't be angry with you, Will."

Will blinks. "You've got this all tangled around," he says.

"You've told me - with your other lovers, it wasn't like it is with me. It was easier."

"It didn't scare me as much because it didn't matter," Will tells him. "Because I wasn't in love with any of them."

And, coming closer to the bone, he adds quietly, "Because I was barely present in my own body when I was with them.

"I don't disassociate with you, Hannibal. I don't hide from myself - you don't let me. That makes it harder, but it can be really, really good, too.

"And - and I'm trying to get better, you know? I've been getting better. I'm better than I was, don't you think?"

Hannibal remembers the feral terror that accompanied their first kiss, how despite all eagerness Will for months after that had not been able to stop himself trembling when Hannibal touched him. It's been a long time since that happened.

"Yes," he says. "You're a lot better, Will."

"I'm never going to be well but I think I can keep on getting better, if I try. I want to keep trying."

"That's fine," Hannibal tells him. "That's good, Will. But I don't need you to do that right now."

"Okay," he says. "Okay. But please understand - you've gotten things tangled around.

"I know that sometimes I… try to use sex to make things better when I'm worried that you're angry with me, or when I feel guilty or… useless. Troublesome or inadequate or too mean, I

guess. I don't always realize that's what I'm doing at the time, but I know it's something that I do, and that it's probably not good. That it's not the healthiest thing, you know.

"But it's something else from the other thing," he insists. "It doesn't have to do with my having been raped."

Will stops, waiting to see what Hannibal will do or say, but he is entirely still. It is the stillness, Will thinks, that one adopts when you happen upon a wounded animal, and are trying to decide if there is something that can be done to help it, and if its pain makes it dangerous.

He is angry, suddenly, though not at Hannibal. "I never invited it from him - not in any way that I understood. And I never just *let* him do it, let alone went looking for it."

Hannibal speaks. "It wouldn't have been your fault if you hadn't resisted, but I know, Will. You fought tooth and nail."

He is thinking about the biting - or, more importantly, the terror that followed for Will, those first times that he bit Hannibal, back when it was still something he did on impulse rather than because Hannibal requested it, before Will was able to come to enjoy it as much as Hannibal does.

It's not the biting itself that was significant, he realizes, but the certainty on Will's part that punishment would follow after, that Hannibal would make him hurt so much more badly for hurting him, and the desperate gratitude that came every time Hannibal assured him that he was not angry.

"You took some awful beatings, trying to keep it from happening."

Will turns his eyes downward. He doesn't answer, but it's as good as an admission.

Hannibal moves closer to Will, but he doesn't try to touch him. Will shivers like a homeless stray caught in a thunderstorm.

Will swallows around the lump in his throat. "Things have been so difficult for you. Maybe - maybe you're really crazy enough that you don't think I'm hard to love, but I know that I'm difficult to live with, that I always make things harder than they need to be.

"And I don't know if I love you right - if there's too much that's fucked up about me for me to do love right - but if I can make you feel good, you know, it feels like that makes up for some of it, you know? But I need to stop that, I know - I'll try not to do that anymore."

There is no point in trying to argue with him about the earlier premises now, Hannibal knows, and Will is right about the last part. Instead, he says, "Is it alright if I touch you?"

Will flinches away. "No," he says. "Later - later would be real good, but not now, okay?"

There are, Hannibal has learned, tears that Will is better off dealing with in private. If he is left alone now, he will be able to bleed some of what is poisoning him out, and after that he will be better able to accept help.

So Hannibal stands and climbs out of the water.

Toweling off, he points with his chin towards the door to their left. “The kitchen is through there,” he tells Will. “I’m going to see about dinner.”

He dresses quickly in the change of clothing that he brought with him from his bag, and then he gives Will the privacy he needs.

Chapter End Notes

Really close to the end now.

Only three - or possibly, four - more chapters to be done, and those are all nearly already written. The one that comes after this one is actually already done, though it's short, and the final two have been mostly complete for months now.

Chapter 32

Chapter Notes

Small one before we move into the conclusion... :)

A different beach house.

A new batch of stray dogs, waiting on the back porch every morning and even for Will to come outside and fill their bowls.

Suntans. Hannibal turning golden all over again, as he had at the safe house, and Will losing some of the pallor that has marked him all these months.

Eating sweets on the beach, Will gently encouraging Hannibal to take more, walking carefully but with confidence the fine line between triggering Hannibal's food related anxiety and allowing him to neglect his body's needs.

Will's heart is quiet, and rarely does he think about killing for its own sake. What they did to the bounty hunters has left him sated to an extent that he has rarely felt before, though though he knows that it won't last forever - that it is only a matter of time until the old itch comes back - but he is content to ride that quiet sense of power for as long as it lasts.

The experience was different for Hannibal.

The helplessness of those hours spent knowing that Will was in danger and that there was nothing he could do to help him has become tangled up in complicated ways with the loss of Mischa. He is tense, in a constant state of hypervigilance, and it is difficult for him to handle being alone - to stand having Will out of his sight, even for a few minutes.

His thoughts are bloody and obsessive, and the regret that he carries from the way that Grutas died becomes knotted up in his fear that Will might be taken from him, as Mischa was, and feeds into his hunger to go on to the next one.

Hannibal wakes, sweating in the night, rigid with fear and directionless rage, the tooth child still moving inexorably forward in his mind's eye, intent not on Hannibal but on Will, and Hannibal knows that when she swallows Will up it will be as though he never existed.

Will's hands find him, and his mouth and his body - holding him, skin on skin, laying soft kisses his shoulders and the back of his neck. Familiar, grounding, home.

“She’s after you now, too,” Hannibal says, his voice so low as to be hardly audible. “Everyone means to take you away from me.”

Will is quiet, but his arms around Hannibal grow tighter.
“I feel like something inside me has snapped, or is about to,” Hannibal says. “If we don’t get Kolnas I don’t know…

“I feel dangerous.” Will lifts his head to look down at him, and sees that the lines around Hannibal’s eyes are strained. His throat works. “Maybe I should have kept myself in check. Maybe I’m changing more than I realized.”

Will brushes his fingers across Hannibal’s cheek, and Hannibal leans into the touch. “Killing changes the way you think,” he says. “I tried to warn you.”
“I keep thinking about my uncle Robert,” Hannibal says, so Will asks, “Tell me about him?”

So Hannibal does; he tells Will how the man was shot in the opening days of the Nazi invasion, long before Hannibal himself was born, and how growing up he’d been so often told that he shared Robert’s uncompromising intellect and stubborn temperament.

In another context, Hannibal tells Will, all the things that are vicious and cold and calculating about him might have been used in the service of human liberation. He might have made an excellent partisan; able to torture and kill without compunction, but also to plan carefully and to carry out those plans without fear or hesitation.

“It wouldn’t have mattered that I was strange - my strangeness would have been seen as an asset, as long as I never pointed it in the wrong direction.”

It would not be good, Will knows, to suggest that with Kolnas they will complete some of the work that Robert never got a chance to tackle, or that there are no lack of Nazis in the world to kill still, old and new, if that’s something Hannibal has a yen for. He knows that’s not the point; that at the heart of the matter is something far more personal.

He gives Hannibal silence, and after a time Hannibal speaks into it.

“The last one was so desperate and ugly. It was dissatisfying, what I did to Grutas.”

Will says, “We’ll make this next one beautiful, then. We’ll make it for Mischa.”

Chapter 33

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

They take Kolnas in his backyard, as he is weeding his vegetable garden.

Kolnas is fit for a man of his age, but he is hard of hearing, and he doesn't notice the creak of the gate when Will and Hannibal let themselves into the fence yard.

He only realizes that he is not alone when Hannibal's shadow falls over him.

Kolnas turns, getting up from his knees at the same time he cranes his head around to look up at them, and Will sees that the old man has been following the news, because he is not really surprised to see them.

The absence of surprise is not the same as a lack of fear, though, and when the two of them, moving in unison, take a step toward Kolnas he freezes, halfway to his feet, like a deer caught in the headlights.

"You heard about Grutas," Hannibal observes. "It must sting, losing your mentor."

"What do I care for Grutas?" Kolnas says, standing up very slowly. "I don't talk with Grutas - I haven't seen those people for forty years." His eyes dart between Will and Hannibal like he is watching a game of table tennis, frantic to discern some sign that at least one of them might be swayed. "I'm glad that they're all dead now. Good riddance - now we can put the past behind us."

"About that…" Will says, and when he smiles at him Kolnas bolts, scrambling around them and making for the gate.

He's fast for a man of sixty-five, but Hannibal is faster, and he catches a handful of Kolnas' graying hair, bringing him up short, then grabs his failing arm by the wrist and holds on.

Will lopes after the two of them, in no particular hurry to interfere with the sight he is taking in; it's a fine thing to see Hannibal so aptly bringing the game to bay, far better than running a target with the hounds.

It occurs to Kolnas to shout for help, and though his house is quite isolated there is no point in taking unnecessary risks, and Hannibal cups his hand over Kolnas' mouth and pins him against the fence while Will applies the ropes.

"Ready here," Will says, when Kolnas' arms have been tied behind his back and his ankles together, and Hannibal removes his hand from over the man's mouth and lets Will slide the gag into place. Hannibal wipes his hand on the back of Kolnas' shirt, feeling dirtied by the contact with his mouth.

Hannibal waits with Kolnas while Will brings the car up to the end of the drive, as close to the gate as it can come, and then gets out of the car and watches the street until he is sure that all is clear. He hurries to Hannibal then and helps him to bundle Kolnas into the trunk.

It's a newer vehicle, unlike the Fury that Will has used for this kind of work in the past, and there had been an emergency release lever in the trunk, but Will has taken the foresight to remove it.

They get back into the car, Will climbing behind the wheel, and he turns to Hannibal and says, "Not too different from the first time we did this, huh?" but Hannibal only gives a small movement of his head, indicating that Will should get the car moving.

The locale Will has scouted out and prepared is not much different from where they killed Mason, either, though more tropical and considerably more remote. If not for the four wheel drive, Hannibal supposes that they might have gotten bogged down in the preserve's unpaved roads, but Will knows how to navigate the mud.

When they've come as close to their destination they can reach with the car, they park and take Kolnas out of the trunk, cutting his legs free and taking away the gag, though they leave his hands tied behind his back.

They march him far into the forest. It's a pleasant hike, for one who is not walking to his own death. No one will find him out here, perhaps, for a very long time.

For a while, Kolnas doesn't try to speak. Too scared, Will thinks - too worried about making another attempt at placating them and failing, too terrified of what he might find out about where they are going if he starts a conversation.

When he does speak, his words have the air of lines that he has laid out carefully and rehearsed inside his mind first.

"I was stupid to hang around with them, right? I know that now, but I was young, and - and angry for our nation - and they seemed to have answers for all the problems we were facing, and such exciting war stories, and I was stupid and didn't know any better.

"And then we were trapped. And Grutas and his friends had been through the war together, they looked after each other like brothers, but I was just some kid they hardly knew, and I was scared that they would turn on me if I didn't go along with them."

Kolnas pauses, short on breath from the hilly climb. "They were as likely to kill me as the two of you."

Hannibal is quiet, his eyes turned upwards as they walk along the trail, tracking something in the canopy. Will glances up and sees the brightly colored parrots darting between the branches.

Will has seen Kolnas' birth certificate, along with a host of other personal records that were uncovered by the private investigation firm he hired, back when Hannibal was still awaiting

trial. When Hannibal does not speak, Will says, “They were children. You were twenty-one, and old enough to know better.”

Having spoken, Will fears that his own anger is too vicarious, that it perhaps sounds therefore manufactured or corny.

“I know the kinds of war stories they told,” Hannibal says, almost serenely, after they have gone on in silence for several more minutes.

When they come to the clearing, into the bright sunlight that filters down through the branches of the single big tree, Kolnas lets his legs slip out from under himself. Hannibal lets go of the ropes binding his wrists to avoid being dragged down into the mud with him.

Kolnas scrambles for Will. He clings to Will’s ankles, dirty hands streaking his jeans with more mud than they had already picked up on during the hike here, his chin tilted upwards to look to Will for mercy. “I didn’t kill the girl,” he says. “I didn’t do it. I didn’t - I didn’t do anything that he didn’t do himself. *He* ate her, too.”

Disgust rises in Will, and he kicks out wildly to free himself from Kolnas’ touch, and then takes several more steps backwards to put more distance between himself and the man, who has curled in on himself and is keening through his bleeding mouth.

There’s almost a gentleness to the way in which Hannibal pulls Kolnas back to his feet, a doctor’s detached consideration for the fragility of a troublesome patient.

He leads Kolnas down towards the clearing, where there supplies are waiting beside the tree, but when they have closed perhaps half the distance Kolnas begins to fight. Glancing along the trajectory that the old man’s gaze most likely followed, Will sees that he must have noticed the knives, which lay in an orderly row on the worktable. A wheelbarrow full of compost and half a dozen large boxes of cut flowers are arrayed around the work table.

Kolnas’ efforts to jerk himself free or to land an effective kick on Hannibal don’t amount to much, aside from wearing down his already taxed physical reserves. Once he’s worn himself out, Hannibal lifts him off the ground and carries him the rest of the way to the tree.

When Hannibal lines Kolnas up against the tree trunk and pins him there, the old man growls something at Hannibal in Lithuanian.

“What did he say?” Will asks Hannibal.

“‘You’re a monster,’” Hannibal translates. “‘You were a creepy fucking kid back then, too. We should have killed you instead.’”

Will watches it roll off Hannibal like water. “Maybe so,” Hannibal answers in English. “But you didn’t.”

“Don't lose your temper,” Will cautions him.

“I'm calm,” Hannibal says, and Will thinks that's the truth.” I'm as calm as I've ever been.”

There are things in Hannibal's head, shadows of memories that dance and spasm on the walls of his mind, but they don't distract him from where he is now.

Three thick branches fork upwards from the tree's trunk, and Hannibal holds Kolnas against the trunk while Will binds him around the waist to the tree, then they cut his arms free and tie them above his head, making a Y-shape that follows the flow of the upwards reaching branches.

The ropes that hold his wrists in place leave him free to flex his hands, and Will notes with satisfaction the way the Kolnas' balls his fists, nails already digging at his palms out the anticipation of pain.

There is no need for them to hurry, and before they do anything else Will and Hannibal unpack the flowers from their insulated boxes, arranging the blooms neatly on the display racks that Will has already set up.

Lilies of the of Nile with their clusters of trumpet-shaped blooms shooting out in all directions, delicate bellflowers dangling down on their stems like raindrops, branches of lilac blooms, dahlias in riots of color, huge tea roses, hyacinth and peonies and hydrangea, all in a hundred different shades of purple.

All for Mischa.

When everything is ready, Hannibal turns to his tools, lifting a knife in his hand and examining the blade thoughtfully.

"I don't need righteousness," Hannibal tells Will placidly, raising his voice a bit so he can be heard clearly over Kolnas, who has begun again to beg. "I don't need the moral high ground.

"I only need this - what you've given me."

Hannibal opens Kolnas up with great care, and his blood drips down into the earth, feeding the tree.

He takes Kolnas' insides out, one organ at a time, and standing where the man can watch his work minces them down into very small pieces. Will is ready beside him with the wheelbarrow full of compost, heavy brown work gloves on his hands. He takes each new batch of meat from Hannibal and mixes it into the compost.

The flowers are behind Hannibal, and their scents are very fine. They are beautiful as well, and from time to time he turns to look at him, imagining the wonder with which Mischa might have greeted such a wealth of purple blooms. They calm him, as much as he requires calming.

"You ought to watch the flowers," Hannibal advises Kolnas, but of course the man's eyes are locked on his work. His screams faded long ago, as did the quiet, desperate pleading that followed after. He begs only with his eyes now.

He goes shortly after Hannibal cuts away his lungs. He and Will watch, the two of them, as Kolnas' face, already starved of blood, takes on a bluish tint around the lips. His mouth works, gulping for air like a fish caught out of water, but only a faint hissing comes from it.

Hannibal takes the heart last. Will wraps it in butcher's paper and places it in the waiting cooler.

The flowers that they fill Kolnas full of will wilt, of course, but before they put the blossoms into place they put a thin layer of compost down inside the empty space which they have made, and sprinkle seeds among the earth. The rest of the compost they spread around the tree, planting it with bulbs and some of the tomato seeds Mr. Javok gave Hannibal.

Will steps away from the tableau, leaning his head again Hannibal's shoulder and snaking his arm around his waist as they take it in. Daisies seem to bloom from where Kolnas' eyes had been, and the bellflowers spill from his mouth like a waterfall. His chest and abdominal cavity are open to the world, exposed and full of color.

One of the dahlias have fallen to the ground next to the flower racks, and Will bends to pick it up, considering the flower thoughtfully. In his wicked, wounded heart Will longs to give such things to the girl child that Hannibal loved so profoundly. The two of them are recipients of a rare gift; the only ones in this life to receive that love, wholeheartedly and without reservation.

He wonders if Mischa, had she lived to grow older, would have been able to make sense of that - if she might have been able to explain to him what, exactly, it was that made Hannibal want him with such a certainty.

There's a natural pool nearby, and the two of them strip off their bloody clothing and climb in under the gentle flow of a lazy waterfall, where in the chest-high water they wash themselves clean of everything except each other.

Will pulls Hannibal close, eyes searching his face for clues. "Does it feel better now?"

Hannibal's answer is unambiguous.

He cups the side of Will's face in his hand and draws him in for a long kiss. It is not passionate, or sexual, that kiss - there's more to it than that, more gratitude and adoration than could be articulated in a lifetime's worth of loving embraces.

"Stay here," Hannibal tells him, when he pulls away at last.

He climbs out of the water and goes to his pack to take something from the side pocket.

Naked as a jaybird and just as lacking in self-consciousness, Hannibal works his way over the rocky walls of the pool one handed, settling down to sit on the rock ledge in front of Will, who has moved into the shallows to meet him there.

“Give me your hand,” Hannibal instructs him, and Will does so, understanding Hannibal’s intention just before he slips the gold ring over Will’s ring finger.

“Wedding bands,” Will says, in a voice that is almost breathless. The swell of emotion that fills his chest is nearly painful, enough to make him sway on his feet as Hannibal presses a second ring into his palm and holds his own hand out for Will to put it on him.

Will’s hands are a little unsteady as he slides the ring onto Hannibal’s finger, and when it is done he clutches Hannibal’s hand in both of his own and brings it to his lips, laying a line of nearly frantic kisses along his knuckles, needing to let out some of the emotion that is building up inside his chest.

He raises his own hand to the light, trying to ignore the ugliness of his scarred fingers as he admires the simple elegance of the ring. There is, Will notices, a small hole placed near the edge of the ring, and he looks to Hannibal to question why when he sees that Hannibal has one more thing to give him.

Unfurling it from where he had secreted it inside his closed fist, Hannibal shows Will the golden bracelet. It is made of many fine strands of gold chain, woven together, and from the bracelet extends a net of the same gold chain, each strand finding its terminus at a small golden fastener, from which extends a minuscule hook.

Hannibal puts the bracelet around Will’s wrist and shows him how to attach the hook to the hole in the ring.

Will holds his hand up to the warm light of the setting sun, and sees the way that the golden chain cascades across the back of his scarred hand, the fine strands overlaying the scars, which seem to glow with the same soft beauty as the gold.

“Kintsugi,” Will says, awed.

“Yes,” Hannibal says. “The both of us.”

Leaning in for another kiss, Will draws Hannibal back into the water with him.

Chapter End Notes

There's a small epilogue to come still, but this is essentially it.

I'm kind of overwhelmed right now.

Chapter 34

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

They've been in Cuba for almost a year when Emilio's book comes out.

Their first set of tourist visas, which they bought during the flight to Havana, lists Will as a Canadian citizen and Hannibal his naturalized husband, hailing originally from Russia. It's unlikely that either of them would be able to sell these backstories, should they come under real scrutiny, though Hannibal is a bit more confident of own his abilities to present a convincing persona than he is of Will's, but visitors staying on the ninety-day tourist visas are rarely subject to much government attention.

The tricky part of it is that the visas are only good for those ninety days. After that, tourists have an option to renew the visa for another three months, but doing so would entail visiting a government office, and that's a risk neither of them are willing to take.

Instead, Hannibal has procured a small stash of blank tourist entry visas, and when one expires they fill in another. They have kept moving, no more than a couple of weeks in any one place, so that their neighbors will not suspect that they have overstayed their welcome.

The streets of Havana are crowded with pedestrians and a hodgepodge of antiquated vehicles, but there is an order beneath the seeming chaos that Will finds surprisingly comforting, once he learns how to parse it. The food is good, though the tap water is a hazard to foreigners, and even some of the residents prefer to boil it before drinking.

There are more museums than Will would have ever credited finding in a city of Havana's size, and they spend a lot of time wandering through them, always staying close to one another. Will supposes he will need to find the courage to go out alone again someday, but Hannibal no more wants him out of sight than he wishes to be away from Hannibal. In the evenings, they go to restaurants to enjoy the food and the live music and the anonymous company of the crowds.

Casual conversations often result in new friends and invitations over for dinner, and he and Hannibal often accept these offers and invite others over to their place in return, though they are careful not to get too close to anyone. Will's undergrad Spanish, the only language other than English he'd studied prior to becoming an international fugitive, comes back to him fairly quickly, but he's still annoyed to have Hannibal - who had never studied the language before - quickly laps him.

Will had his busted tooth fixed while they were still living under the first tourist visa - the pain got so bad that they decided to risk it - but he still doesn't dare to let anyone evaluate his hands. They'll want his medical records before they do any work, and he's not confident enough in the ability of any of the forgers he's hired before to come up with a perfect enough paper trail; anyway, there's a risk that any surgeon might try to contact his supposed former doctors back in Canada, which would almost certainly end in disaster.

After one of their tourist excursions, a few weeks after they arrived in the city, Will poured himself a drink and snuggled in close to Hannibal.

He was in a thoughtful mood, and Hannibal gave him the quiet that he needed to draw his thoughts together.

“It’s not so bad here,” he said at last, as though he hadn’t griped endlessly about their furnishings, the state of their apartment building, the catch-as-catch-can transit system.

“No ghettos or shanty towns, at least,” Hannibal agreed.

“Despite everything I try,” Will went on, studying the amber liquid in the bottom of his glass, “sometimes I still find myself carrying my father’s prejudices.”

The drinking, Hannibal understood by then, was not something that would ever stop, no more than the killing, but at least Will has them both under control for the time being, and he is no longer trying to dig his own grave with a shot glass in the pursuit of numbing himself against himself.

The watchword for life with Will, Hannibal has come to accept, will always be sustainability; the current level of drinking is, more or less, sustainable.

Now, Will draws the cover over his e-reader. He balances it on his knee, fingers drumming anxiously against it, while he waits for Hannibal’s attention.

Hannibal has already finished his own digital copy of the book, and has been comparing the text against book reviews and online commentary.

When he looks up to meet Will’s eyes, Will says, “I’m surprised by how sympathetic the overall narrative is towards me - a little touched, truth be told. You could almost walk away thinking that I was the good guy. Anti-hero, anyway, something like that. Villain protagonist?”

“You were worried about more than how he would frame your moral alignment,” Hannibal says.

“Yeah. I was afraid it wouldn’t come through in his story… how I feel about you. I spent a lot of time encouraging them to be afraid of you, and I was kinda worried that it would read like I really think you’re something terrible.”

Hannibal does not crave or require outside validation to the same degree that Will does - it is, for him, enough to be understood by Will - but he feels a certain degree of relief for himself. It can be tiring, how often he is painted as an absolute monster in the stories people tell about himself and Will.

“What else?” Hannibal says, because it’s clear that there was more that troubles Will.

“I told him something,” Will says slowly, “and I was afraid that he might repeat it. He didn’t though.”

“What did you tell him?”

Will meets his eyes briefly but doesn’t answer. He gets up to pour himself a drink, and when Will’s back is to him, Hannibal says, “You spoke with him, about that?”

Hannibal has difficulty naming the feeling he is feeling now. If it’s jealousy, Will doesn’t seem to parse it as such.

“I know I shouldn’t have,” Will says, apparently reading Hannibal’s question as disapproval. “I know it. Poor bastard isn’t my fucking therapist.”

In the year since the incident with the bounty hunters, Emilio has largely dodged the press; the book is a departure from that - the first complete public account of what happened from Emilio’s perspective and how he has been doing since then. Will worries about Emilio, Hannibal knows, with that off-kilter almost obsessive concern that eats at him when he knows he’s done wrong by someone he likes.

“You know,” Hannibal tells him, “that I don’t pity you. I will never pity you.”

Will exhales loudly. “We aren’t talking about this today.”

“That’s fine, Will.”

“What’s the press saying?”

It’s better, Hannibal has found, if he can limit Will’s access to the online rumor mill. Will is in agreement that googling himself or Hannibal is bad for his mental health, though sometimes he does it anyway. Usually, though, he lets Hannibal monitor the chatter for any potential threats or new developments.

“A lot of forensic psychologists have been weighing in. They’re having a good time trying to read between the lines.” Margot was right, Hannibal has found, that trying to soften a blow for Will only makes things worse. “The consensus seems to be that you are extremely unstable - the phrase ‘ticking time-bomb’ was used by a few different people - and that whatever we are up to won’t last.

“It’s not sustainable, is what they think. One of us is going to slip up and get capture, or if not you’re going to kill me or yourself or both of us before too long.”

Will looks down at his hands, but the ghost of a smile tugs at the edge of his lips. “Funny,” he says, “but I don’t feel particularly unstable.”

Chapter End Notes

Next one is the last for real, and I'm almost done writing it.

Feels strange, let me tell you.

Chapter 35

Chapter Notes

> Okay - so, I didn't actually plan on putting this discussion on the page, but it be it turned out that it needed to be written so I wrote it.
>
> Content warning in the chapter below for detailed discussion of CSA and rape. If you need to skip over the scene - and please, everyone, protect yourselves if it's something that is too difficult for you to read - you can exit this chapter after the line "Hannibal has always wanted to see the city but has never before had the opportunity" to avoid the scene in question.
>
> Next chapter really should be the final one.

The book renews interest in their case, and shortly after its publication Cuba starts to sour.

There is nothing specific that either of them can point to, but Hannibal trusts his instincts and Will is a slave to his own, and when they start to feel like something is about to go south there are no disagreements about the need to move on.

They spend two years in eastern Europe, where they keep mostly to themselves. Though he has no intention of making himself known to the old man, Hannibal makes quiet inquiries into the whereabouts of Mr. Javok. He learns little. Mr. Javok is no longer living in the same apartment building that they once shared, but where he went from there is not clear. Hannibal checks the obituary archives for each of Minsk’s newspapers, but Mr. Javok’s name is not among the dead.

Hannibal does not believe that Mr. Javok went into hiding when he realized who they were - the man was more sensible than to think they would have case to call on him again after the fact - but where he’s gone or why remains a mystery. He likes to think that the old man is back with his family, if he has any family, or else that he found someone to be with.

After the heat of potential pursuit has dissipated into a cautious glow, they spend a year in Florence, simply because Hannibal has always wanted to see the city but has never before had the opportunity.

It’s in Florence that Will at last finds enough of his voice to tell Hannibal the last of it; there’s a hope, on both their parts, that doing so will allow him to bleed out some of the poison that has been weighing him down, but once he picks the scab away the truth comes flooding out like a hemorrhage.

Even then, Will talks around his own pain, shifting the focus whenever possible to how what happened affected others rather than himself.

Sometimes, during the harder parts, he retreats into the second person; easier, Hannibal thinks, for him to manage the empathy he has for the child that he used to be when he stands outside of himself - when he pretends that child was someone else. Someone more deserving of kindness.

It is still so hard for Will to be kind to himself.

“I’ve thought a lot about what it must have been like for our maid,” he says, pacing their rented kitchen, arms curled around himself like shoddy armor. To try to touch him now would invite explosion - would derail the entire conversation, even if things did not spiral into desperate violence, so Hannibal follows Will only with his eyes. “Old woman, three kids of her own, I couldn’t even tell you how many grandkids, bleaching a little boy’s sheets, his underwear, to get the blood out, knowing what’s going on but not having any power to actually do anything about it…”

It takes hours to recount it all - the years of terror and beatings, the creeping unease of the strangeness of his father’s eyes, hunger there that he was too young to understand, the escalating sexual assaults, the futile efforts to defend himself, the sick sleepless horror of never knowing when his bedroom would be invaded in the night. The first rape, and the second, and the third - the fourth and the sixth and the tenth and the thirteenth.

Will’s voice is dull, throughout the telling. He does not look at Hannibal, or raise his voice, or cry, though before very long Hannibal’s own face is wet from quiet weeping. He paces, and he speaks, and that is all.

“Baker’s dozen,” he says without inflection, a nauseous smile yanking on the edges of his mouth. “One for every year I’d been alive up until then, and one more to grow on.

“That was enough. That was all I could fucking take.”

Will stays sober through the entirety of the thing - until they come back to where they began, with the ambush killing of his father - but only for that long. Then he hits the bottle hard.

Hannibal lets him.

He gives Will the space he needs, and does not attempt to follow him into the bedroom, even when he hears the keening - sobs muffled against the pillow for the shame of it.

Will talked about that, too; burying his face in the pillow, gripping it between his teeth, trying to keep the household staff from hearing. Hannibal does not think Will recognized it as other layer of that overriding need to protect people he felt beholden to protect, even then, but it is not something that Hannibal pointed out to him then; he did not attempt to interject or interpret the narrative that Will laid out. That will be a task for later, if at all.

Now, Hannibal sits alone in the kitchen as the sun goes down and the light fades, and quietly plays through in exacting detail exactly what he would do to Will’s father, if given the

opportunity; he might have stretched it out to last a month or more, he thinks, if he was careful to ensure that the pig didn't lose too much blood and none of his wounds became infected.

It is safe, now that he is alone, for him to feel the fury that had been bubbling under his skin during Will's account; there is no risk that Will might mistake even a speck of that rage as being directed at him.

Two hours later, Will bolts from the bedroom, bumping against the walls of their narrow hallway as he staggers for the bathroom.

There a retching. More of that desolated, self-disgusted sobbing. Eventually - silence.

Hannibal gets up and goes to the bathroom door. He raps softly on it. "It's me," he tells Will. "I'm coming in."

Will doesn't answer, but he opens the door anyway.

The room stinks of bile and fear sweat.

"Christ," Will says, from the floor, where he sits propped up against the wall. "Leave me alone, can't you?"

"No," Hannibal says, "I can't." But he gives Will some more time to gather himself together before he pulls him to his feet and directs him to rinse out his mouth and brush his teeth.

They go back to the bedroom and Will sits on the edge of the bed. He looks at his hands - what he's done to himself, thinks about everything he's done to Hannibal and all that he's taken from him. Scars that had almost stopped aching are burning again now. "Christ," he says again, hearing the way his own voice slurs. He is catastrophically drunk. "I shouldn't have told you all of that - I wish that I hadn't. You don't need to carry all of that bullshit for me."

"When Margot told you about Mason, did you berate her for burdening you with her trauma?"

"I am not Margot. Margot is allow -"

"Margot is allowed to do what - be human?"

"You're fucking merciless, you know that? You are so fucking -"

But now he is crying again, quietly and stony faced this time, and he begins to lift the side of his hand to his mouth.

"Will, stop," Hannibal says, and Will laughs bitterly but he lets his hand drop before his teeth close over flesh.

"What difference does it make anyway?"

Hannibal closes his eyes, briefly, and breaths in deeply but silently through his nose. When he feels calm again, he says, “What do you want me to do now, Will?”

He is thinking, *Will won’t want me in bed with him tonight, maybe not for a number nights.* He wonders if the chair by the bed will be good enough, or if he should plan for the couch.

“Can you just -” Will begins, but the words catch in his throat and take away his breath until he is hyperventilating. Hannibal waits impassively until Will is able to speak again. “Can you please just touch me? Just touching - nothing, nothing like...”

“I understand,” Hannibal tells him, and he does; it’s gentle, chaste touching that Will needs now, the kind of touching that a decent father would offer his distraught child, so Hannibal sits down on the bed beside Will, and they pull each other closer until Will is practically in his lap, his forehead pressed against Hannibal’s collarbone and his arms curled around Hannibal’s chest, clutching him as though for dear life, and with one hand Hannibal cradles the back of Will’s skull and with the other he rubs gentle circles against Will’s upper back, and eventually Will is still, though by the time the tears stop the shoulder of Hannibal’s shirt is soaked.

Will is so quiet for such a long time that Hannibal thinks that he must be asleep, and when Will does speak he does so without lifting his head, and Hannibal feels the reverberation of Will’s voice against his own bones.

“After I shot him, I went down to where he was lying, and I cut it off of him.” Hannibal blinks, parsing that, and then he holds Will a little tighter.

“Good.”

“I wanted to jam it down his goddamned throat, but I couldn’t - I couldn’t stomach touching it long enough for that.”

Will turns his head to the side, and there’s bitterness in his voice, packed in among all the self-loathing and the layers of rage and woundedness and bafflement, even with all that he has proven himself capable of, that someone would be able to do to a child what was done to him. “It didn’t mean anything to him, one way or another. He was so close to dead by the time I got to him that he hadn’t any idea of what was happening to him or why or by who.”

When he is sure that Will has said everything that he is going to say, Hannibal says, “I’m glad that you told me. You’re going to be better for having talked about it,” and though the ensuing weeks are hard on Will, Hannibal is, ultimately, right.

Chapter 36

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will watches Hannibal's hands, the fingers still deft as they undo the ship's moorings, despite the arthritis that has begun to creep into his joints, and thinks about what made this all so damned hard for him.

The old fear that he has somehow twisted Hannibal into something that he was not meant to be has long since fallen under the weight of a preponderance of opposing evidence, but if Will is no longer afraid that he has ruined Hannibal he nonetheless is sometimes troubled by the idea that that he has somehow steered Hannibal wrong - that, despite the goodness of the place that they have come to together, it was wrong of him to lead Hannibal here, or to allow himself to be lead.

Will has tried to give up that fruitless moral wrangling - to be more like Hannibal instead. To, like Hannibal, to accept the happiness that their life together brings, to bask in the warm glowing relief of acceptance for all of what he is. To believe in his own worth, the way that Hannibal does.

Most of the time, he is successful. In very many ways, it has become stunningly easy.

Now, Hannibal climbs the stairs up the the helm and joins Will there. He steps away from the wheel, ceding it to Hannibal, and moves to the window.

It will be a long time until their destination comes into view, but Will looks out over the horizon anyway.

The ship had been Hannibal's idea - or, at least, it was Hannibal who took action on what had up to that point been only idle chatter on Will's part.

He'd come to Will a week after he'd told Hannibal everything, with the advertisement open on his tablet. Will was still feeling terribly raw then, exposed and ashamed and disgusted with himself, and that he knew perfectly well how irrational these emotions were and had in the past helped dozens of patients to work towards unpacking and rejecting such unjustified feelings made not the smallest difference in his own case.

It was impossible even to look Hannibal in the eyes - the idea made his own eyes burn and caused defensive anger to spark in his chest - but it was alright because Hannibal didn't try to make him. He just sat down on the couch beside Will, not touching, and held the tablet out to him, and after a few minutes the trembling passed and Will was able to lean into Hannibal's side, and to ask for Hannibal to put his arm around him.

It hurt, telling Hannibal what he had told him - allowing him to know the last of what he'd kept hidden - but it hurt the way picking gravel out of road rash hurt, the way it hurt to have

to vomit up poison; it hurt, but in the wake of that hurting he could feel something inside himself finding enough open space to begin to heal.

It was good, not needing to articulate any of that to Hannibal in order to have it understood, and he leaned the side of his head against Hannibal shoulder and scrolled through the pictures of the Viking with its sleek sharp bow and seafoam blue hull.

“That’s a yacht,” Will observed.

“A small one, yes,” Hannibal allowed.

“Still a yacht,” he said. “An observation, Hannibal, not a complaint; you’ve never suggested dropping this kind of money on anything before. Your usual M.O. is to stand back and let me spoil you, so you can maintain that quiet little air of proletarian disdain while getting everything you wanted anyway.”

The satisfaction on Hannibal’s face might have been easy to miss, for someone who didn’t know him so intimately, but to Will it was plan as day; Hannibal has always taken such a strange pleasure in being utterly transparent to Will.

“I could frame it as a matter of practicality, if you’d like,” Hannibal said, no urgency in his voice; he already knew, of course, that he was going to get his way. “I could note that in the long term it would be considerably less expensive than bouncing from hotel to hotel as we have been doing, and less risky as well, and that a ship would give us additional options should we need to leave the area quickly and quietly.”

“Those would be sound arguments,” Will agreed, not really bothering to weigh them. He was, already, utterly taken with the idea. “But?”

“But that’s not really why I want it. I’m ready to make a home with you again, Will, like we had in Washington. It’s been long enough.”

“No more living out of suitcases. Our own kitchen - even if it’s a ‘small one.’ Sleeping in the same bed every night.” By then, almost four years had passed since the bounty hunters snatched Will up off the street. They’d kept moving since then, never staying in the same place for more than a few months, and often relocating after only a few days at any given hotel or short-term rental property. “I want that a lot, too,” Will said.

It was Hannibal’s turn to prompt, “But?”

“You know,” Will says, evasive despite himself. Hannibal arm was still over his shoulders, and Will squirmed beneath it. “I’m almost afraid to get too comfortable, you know? Seems like every time I do, something blows up in our faces.”

Hannibal was quiet, and Will knew that he was being given the space to talk himself into it.

“It would make killing less risky, wouldn’t it?” Will went on. “Bring him back to the boat. Cast off. Go out far enough that no one else will hear the screaming. Throw what we don’t use of the body overboard - let the sharks or whatever else eat it.”

Despite his words, murder had not been high on Will's list of priorities since what happened with the bounty hunters. They'd killed twice in the three years since, both times at Hannibal's prompting; that Will's own personal need for violence had remained more or less sated since they'd killed Scott and his friends did not mean that he saw any reason to deny Hannibal, or that Will failed to appreciate the bright bloody glory that Hannibal wrought upon his targets.

Will was looking at the pictures of the ship again. "A person could cross the Atlantic in that, if he planned well and was careful." He didn't really bother to try to keep the longing out of his voice - Hannibal would hear it regardless.

There were things that Will missed; Baltimore and his home there, visiting with his patients at his office, his pack of hunting dogs - even his family home, despite the hell he'd lived through there as a child and his own unease in possessing such a place.

He'd traded all of that away for Hannibal, and would do it again in a heartbeat, a thousand times over, but there were things he missed nonetheless. Will couldn't help it.

Hannibal had far less regrets, and the suggestion made him uneasy. "Two or three more years," he offered, "and by then it might be safe to consider a trip back to the United States."

Knowing better, Will shook his head at that and changed the subject; another decade would pass before Will dared to take the risk, and by then what desires he'd had to go home again were a ghost of what they'd once been.

They've spent the last ten days in Louisiana. There's not much of the debonair, warmly confident professional that he'd used to be left in Will, at least externally, and he doubts that after all these years anyone but close acquaintances or past friends would stand a chance at recognizing him, but he insisted on caution anyway. They steered clear of his former family estate, traveling further inland than the northern edge of New Orleans, and avoided parts of that city which he'd visited in the past, even only occasionally.

Will has looked at pictures of the old plantation online. The new owners have, unsurprisingly, made it into a bed and breakfast, and there seem to be a mystifying number of cats living there.

"We could go and burn the place to the ground," Will suggested, their first night in town. It wasn't a joke at all but it wasn't serious, either. "No, I know it," Will said to Hannibal's unvoiced objection. "Place seems to be getting a lot of traffic - might be kids sleeping in the house."

While in New Orleans, they'd out to eat three times a day for a week, a different restaurant each time, and got drinks in the evening. Will tried to ingrain fresh memories of every sight, sound, taste and texture that he encountered during their time there, knowing that they would likely never be back again, but none of it felt exactly right. Sixteen years had gone by since that last visit to his family estate with Hannibal; being back home was like trying to slip back into a well-worn set of shoes that he'd long since outgrown - comfortable in theory, but stifling in reality.

Early one morning, they loaded newly purchased camping gear into their rental car and drove down to one of the national parks and camped out for three nights, wandering the hiking trails and observing the wildlife; Will found a female gator that likely outweighed himself and Hannibal put together, and with the utmost caution they approached to a safe distance and for more than an hour watched as she looked after her young.

That was, for Will, the highlight of the trip.

There wasn't much reason to fear capture. By now, Jack Crawford has taken retirement, an otherwise distinguished career marred only a little by his failure to apprehend the two of them. If the media gossip is to be believed, his replacement is of the opinion that Will and Hannibal are long dead.

Freddie Lounds still has faith in them, at least; over the last decade Tattle Crime has attributed more than three dozen murders to himself and Hannibal. On two occasions, her guesses have even been right, though by the time Lounds decided to connect those cases back to them they were hundreds of miles away from where the killings took place.

When he and Hannibal take someone, which is not all that often these days, they are careful about it, and the body is rarely found. Will has no intention of allowing himself or Hannibal to be hurt or captured again.

Despite the trip being fairly low risk, Will felt like he needed to look over his shoulder the whole time they were ashore anyway.

He says to Hannibal now, "I'm not sorry that we went, but I'm glad to be leaving."

"A kind of closure," Hannibal says, and Will remembers the trip to Lithuania they made two years previously, to visit Mischa's grave. The small stone was poorly tended, mossy and surrounded by overgrown weeds, and they'd spent a couple of hours cleaning it in extracting detail.

Will had worried that it would be rough on Hannibal - that it would trigger more barely repressed traumatic memories, or drag him down into one of those periods of increased anxiety and depression were it would be hard to get him to eat, but Hannibal still found ways to take Will by surprised. Hannibal was happy to be there, pleased to have all three of them together at last, if only for the afternoon.

"You looking forward to seeing Margot?" Will asks him, though he knows the answer.

"I am," Hannibal says, "though I'm sorry Thomas isn't able to come."

Will shrugs, looking out over the water. In the past, he has taken the Viking out to open water once or twice a year to meet Margot on her own yacht, so that he, Margot and Tommy spend some time together.

Hannibal is usually on board the Viking during these visits, but stays below deck so the boy does not see him. This has meant that Margot and Hannibal have rarely gotten to see one another to face to face, except for those times when she was able to slip away while Thomas

was sleeping or while Will entertained the boy, and as he has gotten older they have had to be more careful.

It's hard for Will to say, even now, how much of the truth his son knows. Will and Margot have not, as Hannibal suggested, offered up Will's poor mental health as an explanation for the odd conditions under which they get together or the infrequency of those meetings, but Will knows from the shades of pity that sometimes leak into their interactions that Thomas is nonetheless aware that Will is fundamentally unwell.

Pity is better than some of the possible alternatives, and Will accepts it, knowing that Thomas loves him and forgives him his shortcomings as much as he is able. Thomas is complicated, and more like Will than Will might have wished for the boy's sake, but there is shockingly little resentment in him.

When, a few years earlier, Thomas when announced over dinner his intentions to apply to psychology programs, it was impossible for Will to hide his panic. He'd owned it instead, letting Thomas and Margot both see that anxiety, the layers of conflicted emotional agitation that were still present, despite his how much the choice pleased him.

"Did you pick that because of me?" Will asked quietly, not quite daring to meet Thomas' eyes.

A hundred different voices were inside of Will's head, whispering over and over again, *he knows he knows everything he knows who you really are,* and so Will barely heard Thomas' answer.

"A little bit," Thomas admitted. "I want to help people." Whatever crossed Will's face made Thomas pause, uncertain. "That's alright, isn't it?"

Will smiled as steadily as he could. "It's great," he said, meaning it. "You can't know how proud I am of who you are becoming."

If the right pieces happened to fall into place for Thomas, it would take little more than some casual googling for him uncover almost everything. Will still doesn't know what he'll do if that day finally comes, but he finds a certain degree of comfort in a growing certainty that Thomas is stable and strong enough to survive that knowledge.

In any case, Thomas isn't coming this time.

He'd called Will a few days ago. There was a boy - another young man - and his name was Lance, and he had invited Thomas to stay at his family's beach house on Oak Island over spring break, and he promised he wouldn't miss the next family vacation but would it okay if it was just Will and Mom this time around?

The disappointment hit Will hard, but he was able to shunt it to the side and focus on the happiness in Thomas' voice, and how genuinely happy that made Will in return.

Looking across the water now, Will sighs, but it isn't a sad sound. "I think Thomas is going to be alright, you know? He isn't normal, exactly, but the ways in which he isn't normal aren't

twisted around in him."

Not like me, he doesn't say, but of course Hannibal knows what he means. Will can see that in his face, reflected back at him in the yacht's windshield, transparent and faded beside his own ghostly reflection.

It is not enough to only see him, and Will goes to Hannibal and circles around behind him to put his arms around Hannibal's waist. There's a little give in Hannibal's middle - not a lot but some - and though he does not remark upon it that pleases Will. In a man Hannibal's age, a little extra weight in preferable to thinness - insurance that his body will have the extra resources needed to fight against the flu or other physical crises.

Hannibal turned sixty-five just last week. Will worries about things; strokes and heart disease and cancer, the idea of that it might in the end be age that takes Hannibal away from him, and that he will have no say in the matter.

It hardly matters that Hannibal is in perfectly fine health - better, probably, than Will is himself. Will worries anyway, but the worrying is not entirely bad; they are so normal, those worries, the concerns of any person married to an older partner.

There's a silver lining to Thomas not being able to come this time; since Hannibal won't need to stay out of sight, Will is going to be able to spend the entire trip enjoying getting to watch Hannibal and Margot enjoying one another's company. Will regrets, often, their friendship having to take a backseat to his maintaining a relationship with his son, though Hannibal and Margot still speak together via video chat quite often.

It's been one of the brightest points in Will's life, knowing two of the people he loves best love each other so well too.

"Margot got you a birthday cake," Will tells him, a parody of wickedness in his voice at this disclosure. "*Shhhh,* though. It's meant to be a surprise."

Will perches his chin on Hannibal's shoulder and studies his face, the deep tan and the network of laugh lines that crinkle around Hannibal's eyes when he smiles under Will's attention and turns his head to the side coyly. His hair, which runs all the way down to Hannibal's shoulders when he doesn't tie it back, is entirely silver now, a stunning counterpoint to Will's own shaggy salt and pepper mop.

"You know," Will says, "I don't think I'm ever going to get tired of just looking at you."

"The feeling is mutual," Hannibal tells him, and turns his head to place a quick kiss on Will's cheek, just above the faded tangle of scar tissue.

Chapter End Notes

Wow guys, my heart is pounding so fast. I can't believe that I am finally done with this project.

This really is the end this time, though I might write a few drabbles set in this universe at some point down the line. I think this is the best place at which to leave these two, don't you?

In the coming days, I will probably add a chapter to the end of this rounding up all the gift art and commissions that I have received for this series.

Thanks so much to everyone who has followed along with these stories. Your support means more to me than I could ever say.

<333

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